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WILLINGNESS TO ENACT CHANGE: A GROUNDED THEORY STUDY ON  
ACCEPTANCE FROM A TRANS PERSPECTIVE

by

Megan Swets

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment  
Of the Requirements for the  
University Honors Program

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Department of Communication Studies  
The University of South Dakota  
December, 2018

WILLINGNESS TO ENACT CHANGE

The members of the Honors Thesis Committee appointed  
to examine the thesis of Megan Swets  
find it satisfactory and recommend that it be accepted.

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# WILLINGNESS TO ENACT CHANGE

## ABSTRACT

### Willingness to Enact Change: A Grounded Theory Study on Acceptance from a Trans Perspective

Megan Swets

Director: Leah Seurer, Ph.D.

The rate of suicide attempts among trans (i.e., transgender) people is astronomically high, which is largely a result of the stigma and discrimination they face. However, when trans people experience acceptance, their rate of mental health problems declines to mirror the cisgender population. Despite this established importance of acceptance, the literature on trans experiences has failed to rigorously define the communicative aspects of acceptance. This qualitative study analyzes interviews with trans people using grounded theory to determine how trans people articulate experiencing acceptance. Results indicate a process of change—preceded by and upheld through willingness—that focuses on enacting change in three areas: the self (through doing research and performing emotional labor); the relationship (through being available, adapting language, and adapting to the trans person’s needs); and society (through advocating interpersonally and recognizing trans identities beyond trans spaces). Implications for this study include a breakthrough in the burgeoning field of trans communication research that ultimately results in a theory of trans identity acceptance; practically, these results facilitate the construction of a trans-inclusive society and encourage the building of fulfilling relationships across differing identities.

**KEYWORDS:** Trans, Acceptance, LGBTQ+, Grounded Theory, Social Support, Communication Privacy Management, Gender Minority Stress and Resilience

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**ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

I gratefully acknowledge the financial support of the College of Arts and Sciences, through the John W. Carlson Research Grant, and the U.Discover Scholar Summer Program. These contributions were integral to completing this project.

## CHAPTER ONE

### Introduction

Healthy family and friend relationships require effective and multilateral social identity support (McGene, 2013). Defined simply, identity support is accepting and supporting a social identity that the individual considers valuable (Weisz & Wood, 2005). Need for identity support varies according to the value each person attributes to their various social identities, but people tend to seek support for the identities they value (Ethier & Deaux, 1994). Social identity support is vital to forming and maintaining close relationships (Weisz & Wood, 2005). Membership in the LGBTQ+ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, queer, and others) community operates as a social identity. While LGBTQ+ people share the diversity of values of their straight counterparts, sexual and gender minorities who value this aspect of their identity require support and acceptance of their LGBTQ+ identity from significant others to maintain strong relationships (Shilo & Savaya, 2011). While sexual identities might influence many aspects of a person's life, gender identities are equally (or perhaps to a greater extent) inextricable from interactions between persons. The importance of support for trans individuals and the uniquely tenuous nature of that support influences their relationships. This study investigates the complexity of how support manifests in the relationships trans people experience, specifically deciphering how trans people define and articulate experiencing acceptance, or identity support, of their gender identity.

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“Transgender” is an umbrella term that describes an individual whose internally-felt and authentic gender identity does not match the sex they were assigned at birth; in contrast, “cisgender” describes an individual whose gender identity matches the sex they were assigned at birth. For example, a transgender person might define themselves as being a man (when assigned female at birth) or a woman (when assigned male at birth). In addition to this traditional definition of transgender, a growing number of individuals identify with the term “non-binary,” another umbrella term (that falls under the transgender umbrella) describing those persons who might identify with both manhood and womanhood or neither manhood nor womanhood. A final term necessary for understanding this study, “trans” intentionally recognizes and encompasses the diversity of gender experiences; this study uses trans as a descriptor for anyone who does not identify as cisgender.<sup>1</sup>

This study aims to confront the stigma and discrimination trans people face and understand how this marginalized identity influences the role of social support in relationships. The primary value of this study includes ameliorating trans people’s experiences of discrimination by providing insight into their experiences of acceptance and facilitating the creation of resources for cisgender people to better ally themselves with the trans community. Scholarship on trans issues is sparse; by further exploring the unique experiences of trans individuals, communication scholars can better grasp how marginalized groups experience social support. Investigating how the relationships trans

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<sup>1</sup>For a sampling of the diversity of gender identifications, as well as definitions of some nuanced gender identifications, see the glossary created by the Fenway Institute (2010). While not comprehensive, the document defines a variety of trans terms. An alternative to this document is Ash Hardell’s (2017) book *The Gay BCs of LGBT+*, which, while not a scholarly source, comes directly from an active member of the LGBTQ+ community, and therefore reflects more complete and current definitions.

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people have shift and change in healthy and unhealthy ways can elucidate the complexity of the experience of marginalization on family and friendship relationships.

The context surrounding trans experiences informs the significance of finding ways to support trans people. A 2016 poll showed that 20% of 18-34 year olds in the U.S. identify as LGBTQ+, and 12% identify as trans, representing a striking increase from previous generations (GLAAD, 2017). While LGBTQ+ identification rises in the younger generation, they are also engaging in more conversations about intersectionality. The recognition of the issue of intersectionality initiated with third-wave feminist bell hooks' (1984) articulation of her intersectional oppression as a black woman. She argues for a restructuring of society and peoples' conversations about oppression, encouraging a broader understanding of how various social positions influence a person's life and experiences. Stemming in part from hooks' call, the third wave of feminism not only fights for increasing women's rights, but further recognizes how various identities coalesce and intersect, ultimately aiming to increase equity and access for oppressed groups (Fixmer & Wood, 2005). Walker's (1995) book reflects the emergence of the third wave of feminism, and describes a "generation that has grown up transgender, bisexual, interracial...[creating] identities that accommodate ambiguity and our multiple positionalities" (p. xxxiii)." In addition to the generational shift towards multiplicity, social media has facilitated LGBTQ+ identity formation through visibility: specifically, by providing "identification and observation of similar others" (Fox & Ralston, 2016, p. 641). Third-wave feminism's forwarding of LGBTQ+ rights, along with the visibility social media provides, has resulted in an age of visibility for trans identities and more generally, diverse gender expressions.

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Despite gains in trans people's visibility and recognition from the general population, a stigma still surrounds trans experiences, and trans people are subject to discrimination<sup>2</sup>. The present study examines how people who identify as trans define feeling acceptance, ultimately endeavoring to promote acceptance of diverse gender identities. This study should further contribute to the development of materials to facilitate family's and friends' communication of support to trans loved ones. The small, but growing body of trans research has not addressed several assumptions about trans experiences. While the importance of acceptance among trans people has been well established (James et al., 2016), the manifestations of acceptance have been largely imposed on the trans community without substantial or reliable evidence of their effectiveness. In other words, while many studies reference the importance of acceptance in maintaining mental health for gender diverse individuals, this acceptance is typically assumed to be simple. For example, Norwood and Lanutti (2015) and James et. al. (2016), both impose the correct use of a chosen name and pronouns to denote acceptance. While these actions are certainly imperative for communicating acceptance, the complexity of the trans experience calls for greater nuance when exploring the experience of acceptance. Because trans identities are a marginalized identity, the experience of acceptance should be considered more complex and the assumptions of how it manifests should be more thoroughly investigated.

To better understand this experience of acceptance, this study examines the communicative processes of acceptance in trans people's relationships. The results from this study should improve the experience of coming out for trans people by giving their

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<sup>2</sup> For a detailed critical review of trans stigma and discrimination in the U.S., see White Hughto, Reisner, and Pachankis, 2015.

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significant others the tools to best communicate acceptance. First, I review the extant research in the field of communication studies on LGBTQ+ experience before describing the effect that acceptance can have on trans people and examining where that acceptance currently fails. I ultimately determine an explanation of what researchers have gleaned about acceptance in the trans community and explore articulations of acceptance from trans people's perspectives. The goal of the study is to utilize grounded theory to define how trans people define acceptance to provide a clear set of guidelines for allies of the trans community to best articulate their support.

## CHAPTER TWO

### Literature Review

#### I: LGBTQ+ Research

The field of communication was among the first to traverse the ground of LGBTQ+ research (Gross, 2005). Chesebro (1981) wrote *Gayspeak: Gay Male and Lesbian Communication* as one of the first reviews of LGBTQ+ communication literature. This text, while revolutionary at the time, ostensibly focuses on sexuality and reflects the hegemonic view of sexuality as a binary opposition. Gross (2005) updated the record of communication literature, explicitly including “bisexual and transgender” in their review title. When anticipating future directions, they identify the gap in research specific to trans identities. They argue that gender identity, despite being distinct from sexuality, had not been treated disparately in research. Due to this historic conflation of gender and sexuality, an overview of LGBTQ+ research is necessary for understanding the research conducted on trans experiences and identities.

Most recently, Chan (2017) updated the record of LGBTQ+ communication research by reviewing LGBTQ+ literature that was published in established communication journals from 2010-2015. This review, like many of the above reviews, included queer theory research. This approach investigates a variety of subjects to find “queer potential” (Chan, 2017, p. 2652), or interpreting a subject as containing unexpected queer characters, messages, or elements. Some researchers apply queer theory to critique communication literature’s erasure of queer identity (Eguchi & Asante,

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2016), but many apply queer theory to the communicative elements of a subject (Yep, Lovaas, & Elia, 2004). Although many people conflate queer theory and LGBTQ+ research, the former variety of queer theory research is largely irrelevant to LGBTQ+ research, and the latter two, while valuable in confronting biases in research, fail to advance understandings of LGBTQ+ identities. Distinct from queer theory applications, LGBTQ+ research more explicitly addresses experiences of communication for LGBTQ+ individuals.

Research into LGBTQ+ identities can be categorized into four broad avenues, which largely reflect the subdisciplines of communication studies: media, culture, health, and interpersonal communication. The research on media and LGBTQ+ identities includes content and critical analyses, as well as reception-based and production-based studies (Chan, 2017; Kuntsman & Al-Qasimi, 2012). LGBTQ+ research focusing on culture includes awareness-raising studies focusing on history, law, and politics; this section represents research on negotiating cultural identities. The third segment of LGBTQ+ research is health communication. Much of the research on LGBTQ+ experiences in healthcare settings is related to HIV prevention, care, and perceptions. The final section of LGBTQ+ research investigates the intersection of interpersonal and family communication with LGBTQ+ experiences, focusing on the construction of normative gender and sexuality, dating apps, and the application of extant theory to the LGBTQ+ community. These categories cover the broad range of LGBTQ+ research; however, the new and growing field of trans-specific research, while progressing appropriately, requires greater attention to achieve more thorough understandings of

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nuances of LGBTQ+ and trans experiences. Identity support is one such area that requires greater attention specific to the LGBTQ+ community.

While identity support is vital for everyone, it becomes particularly relevant for LGBTQ+ individuals. The theory of social identity describes the social construction of self (Tajfel, 1978). Group membership works to form one aspect of self-definition, or a social identity (Deaux, 1993). Since LGBTQ+ individuals have an identity that requires confirmation of acceptance, as a whole, they have uniquely tenuous relationships, particularly with those family members who might not be supportive of their sexuality or gender identity. Considering the importance of identity support, acceptance of the LGBTQ+ person's sexual or gender identity determine the LGBTQ+ person's health; social support contributes positively to LGBTQ+ persons' mental, emotional, and even physical health (Fingerhut, 2018; Flenar, Tucker, & Williams, 2017; Williams, Mann, & Fredrick, 2017). Experiencing acceptance of their LGBTQ+ identity counteracts the negative effects of stigma and discrimination (Fingerhut, 2018). A body of work on the stress and resilience of sexual minorities shows that navigating the world with an LGB identity causes people to experience greater degrees of stress; two views, the subjective (which focuses on facilitating the person's view of their condition) and objective (which focuses on the environmental factors that contribute to stress) dominate the conversation about solving the minority stress (Meyer, 2013).

While these researchers might have established the importance of social support to LGB people, their samples almost exclusively feature LGB people (100% in Fingerhut, 2018; 92.8% in Flenar, et al., 2017; and 100%% in Williams et al., 2017). This variety of research provides valuable information about social support in the LGB community, yet

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these studies fail to encapsulate diverse gender experiences. Citing Spencer and Capuzza's (2015) book *Transgender Communication Studies*, Chan (2017) concludes that trans experiences have been receiving more thorough attention in recent years. Despite this progress, one key emerging current in research that they identify is "balancing the L/G/B/T/Q" (p.2654). The majority of research focuses on the experiences of gay men, same-sex relationships, or simply and broadly, LGBTQ+ experiences. Spencer and Capuzza (2015) reference this focus, and respond to it with the aforementioned book. Rather than serving as a comprehensive remedy to this gap, the authors position the text as foundational, i.e., intended to be built upon and extended. Trans experiences, while an essential part of LGBTQ+ experiences, are unique, and deserving of distinct and focused attention in communication research.

### **II: The Power of Trans Acceptance and Support**

Adapting Meyer's (2013) concept of minority stress to trans identities, the Gender Minority Stress and Resilience (GMSR) measures stress and resilience in trans people, with the goal of evaluating the effectiveness of support techniques (Testa, Habarth, Peta, Balsam, & Bockting, 2015). An application of the GMSR demonstrates the relationships between suicidal ideation and rejection, nonaffirmation, and victimization (Testa, Michaels, Bliss, Rogers, Balsam, & Joiner, 2017). Trans people use support from the LGBTQ+ and trans community to build resilience (Singh, 2013). The U.S. Transgender Survey found that an appalling 40% of trans respondents had attempted suicide, which authors observe is "nearly nine times the attempted suicide rate in the U.S. population (4.6%)" (James et al., 2016, p. 5). This stark difference showcases the severity of suffering that trans people experience due to the stigma and discrimination they face, and

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the inadequacy of current efforts toward support and acceptance. Investigating trans persons' access to social support, heinz (2015) found trans people self-report overwhelming feelings of loneliness and isolation. Access to effective and appropriate healthcare is also problematic since many trans people report having transphobic healthcare providers, and as a result, describe overall healthcare experiences as fearful (Wagner, Kunkel, Asbury, and Soto, 2016). Even though there is a general dearth of support for trans people, some indirect ground has been gained in determining the best methods for communicating support.

Trans people suffer due to everyday experiences of discrimination and stigma (White Hughto, Reisner, & Pachankis, 2015); acceptance has the capacity to assuage this suffering. When trans people perceive the general population to be accepting of their trans identity, they are less likely to report problems with their mental health (Dargie, Blair, Pukall, & Coyle, 2014; Pflum, Testa, Balsam, Goldblum, & Bongar, 2015). The important role of acceptance in trans persons' mental health emerges when considering the gender affirmation framework (Sevelius, 2013). The gender affirmation framework articulates that if trans people lack identity affirmation, they tend to seek this affirmation through two avenues: either substance abuse or risky sexual behavior—specifically, practicing unsafe sexual behaviors with people who use affirming language that recognizes their gender identity (Sevelius, 2013). Applied to personal relationships, the gender affirmation framework shows that gender affirmations work to improve trans women's psychological well-being (Glynn, Gamarel, Kahler, Iwamoto, Operario, & Nemoto, 2016). Gender affirmations show that improving trans mental health can be accomplished through promoting acceptance and displays of support in their

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interpersonal relationships. Despite making this important contribution to showing the importance of affirmations, the gender affirmation framework is deficient. Without appropriate and adequate recommendations for how to properly affirm the gender of trans individuals, the knowledge of the importance of reinforcing gender through acceptance does not make a material difference on the experiences of trans individuals.

The acceptance and support of trans persons' significant others work to counteract the negative effects stigma can have on their psyche. Parental support can operate to improve the psychological well-being of trans individuals (Wilson, Chen, Arayasirikul, Raymond, & McFarland, 2016); however, family support is complicated—a significant other coming out as trans acts as a family stressor, causing family members to undergo an extreme emotional experience as they adjust to the trans family member's identity (Norwood, 2012). When a family member undergoes an extreme change, the family may struggle to overcome competing emotions and perceptions, or relational dialectics. In the case of gender transition, family members may struggle to overcome the presence/absence relational dialectic, wherein they feel a contradictory tension because the person is physically and psychologically present, yet their identity (or at a minimum, the relationship) has changed, leading to an ambiguous sense of loss. The ambiguous loss family members experience when a trans person comes out often precludes family members from adequately supporting the trans person in their family (Norwood, 2013). Since families are experiencing the coming out of the trans person as a stressful experience, they may struggle to adequately communicate support. In these cases, the trans person does not forego support, but instead seeks support from friends or a romantic partner to replace the family in communicating acceptance. Research conducted with

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sexual orientation minorities shows that support of romantic partners has a positive effect on both mental and physical health, suggesting that support in a romantic relationship might have a similar effect on a trans person's health (Blair & Holmberg, 2008).

Regardless of whether family, friends, romantic partners, or others communicate the necessary acceptance to the trans individual, a better grasp on how trans people delineate acceptance from significant others would provide necessary guidance for family members struggling through experiencing relational dialectics and potentially, attempting to communicate acceptance.

Researchers using grounded theory explored the needs that trans adults report having felt during childhood, which included “educated authority figures; acceptance and support to discuss their gender variance; freedom of identity expression; validation; and recognition” (Riley, Clemson, Sitharthan, & Diamond, 2013, p. 241). These needs explicitly validate the necessity of acceptance and support, and provide some direction for pursuing a definition of trans acceptance. The focus on needs felt in childhood, while valuable, necessarily limits findings to only the experiences of trans and gender non-conforming children, not adults (not to mention the potentially necessary, but undermining complication of collecting childhood needs from trans adults). Riley, et al. (2013) explores the ideas of acceptance in terms of engaging in conversations about gender variance, but the researchers do not further this theme of acceptance into an investigation of the manifestations of general acceptance. In another grounded theory study, researchers analyzed trans people's gender identity formations (Levitt & Ippolito, 2014); one cluster researchers found indicates the importance of language in cultivating acceptance—specifically, hearing narratives of trans identity and exploring non-

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normative gender presentations. Although this study revealed important information about acceptance, the cluster was treated as simply an element of identity formation. While that element is surely important to identity formation, the phenomenon of acceptance, as fundamental to trans mental health, deserves deliberate and concentrated attention. Similar to Riley, et al. (2013) and Levitt and Ippolito (2014), the present study uses grounded theory analysis to decipher trans experiences, specifically, closely analyzing the phenomenon of acceptance.

### **III: Grounded Theory**

Grounded theory is a qualitative research method that aims to construct the conclusions, implications, findings, and theory that result from studies atop a foundation of data, minimizing speculative claims (Charmaz, 2014). As the name implies, grounded theory is a form of analysis that aims to firmly *ground* any resultant *theory* in the data from a study. The method achieves this goal by offering flexible and mutable approaches and strategies that, rather than either leaving researchers to flounder through analysis or offering strict steps towards completion of a study, allow the researchers to adapt to derive accurate, structured, and true-to-data theories (Charmaz, 2014). Grounded theory acts as an intense conduit through which a researcher sorts and condenses data to manageable and meaningful essential elements. Through qualitative coding, the researcher eventually develops written memos. In this manner, a grounded theory scholar builds levels of abstraction from the data, but never breaks or stretches the link between the data and the interweaving theory that, ideally, the researcher develops.

Grounded theory methods effectively fulfill this study's purpose. Researchers have already used grounded theory methods to glean insight into how trans people

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experience acceptance (Levitt & Ippolito, 2014; Riley et al., 2013). This study builds upon these findings to explicitly interpret articulations of acceptance for trans identified people. This approach particularly suits this study due to the thinness of trans research; there does not currently exist a strong foundation of theory built upon solid data, so an accurate reflection of trans experiences requires meticulous and robust ties between data and theory. As an additional concern that warrants the use of grounded theory analysis, the researcher does not identify as trans, and therefore aimed to carefully interpret and reflect the data—a goal for which grounded theory provides specific steps and strategies.

While research on LGBTQ+ peoples' experiences with acceptance inform understandings of specifically trans acceptance, the above research insinuates that the broader society in general, and friends and family of trans people in particular, must improve the methods of communicating support to trans people to facilitate an improvement in trans mental health. Despite the headway towards understanding trans experiences that some studies have gained, a grounded theory analysis that specifically investigates trans people's experience of acceptance will contribute not only to a deeper scholarly understanding of trans experiences, but also has the potential to improve the mental and physical well-being of many trans people.

**RQ1:** How do trans individuals articulate experiencing acceptance from their social support group?

## CHAPTER THREE

### Method

This research study sought to understand trans experiences of acceptance. The researcher conducted open-ended interviews with trans people in the Midwest. The transcribed audio from these interviews served as data, which were analyzed using the grounded theory method articulated by Charmaz (2014).

#### I: Participants

Participants of this study self-identified with the word “trans” or “transgender.” The recruitment began with the researcher inviting people the researcher knew personally or met at a local Pride festival to participate; the researcher then requested that Facebook groups, organizations, and people who work with trans individuals (e.g., gender therapists) in the vicinity of the researcher and anticipated research destinations diffuse word of the study. After these initial overtures, snowball sampling was engaged, where the researcher asked the participants to post about the study or pass on the information to other trans people they knew. Participation was voluntary; however, \$25 gift cards were offered as an incentive and as reimbursement for the time spent in the interview.

The researcher conducted 29 interviews with 28 participants<sup>3</sup>, but the preliminary analysis included in this report results from 15 interviews. This segmentation of data analysis sets the stage for a verification procedure (described in more detail below).

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<sup>3</sup> Two interviews were conducted with the same participant. This participant asked to stop the interview after just over 20 minutes; the researcher and this participant were able to conduct a follow-up interview approximately a month later to complete the questions.

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Although all participants claimed trans or transgender as an identifier, Of the 15 interviews analyzed in this report, 26.6% identified as men, 13.3% identified as women, and 60% identified under the non-binary or trans umbrellas. Participants ranged in age from 19-37, and 86.6% were White, 13.3% Latinx, and 6.6% Middle Eastern. The participants were primarily living in the Midwest, with few outliers; seven participants lived in South Dakota (one interviewed via a video-call service), five in Colorado (one via video-call), one in Iowa, one in Washington (video-call), and one in New York (video-call). See Table 1 for more detail on participants' gender identities, the age distribution, races/ethnicities, and locations.

## **II: Procedure**

### **Interviews**

With one exception, the interviews were a one-time interaction. Of the 28 total interviews, eight were conducted via a video calling service, and 21 were conducted in person; for the 15 analyzed interviews, four were conducted via video call and 12 were conducted in person. The majority of interviews took place within a 70-mile radius of the South Dakota research base, but the researcher took two trips to major metropolitan areas in the Midwest for data collection. For the interviews, participants selected the location they preferred: these locations included interviewees' homes, coffee shops, restaurants, and library meeting rooms. Interviews ranged from 26 minutes to 3 hours and 9 minutes; however, the average time was 1 hour and 15 minutes.

During the interviews, the researcher collected demographic information before using an interview guide that contained 28 open-ended questions; however, the researcher adapted the guide for each interview, occasionally pursuing themes the participant

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stressed, asking for clarification, or omitting questions for the sake of time or avoiding repetition. The interviewer allowed the participants to talk for as long as necessary, largely without interruption or clarification unless the participant paused or expressed their answer's closure. At the end of each interview, the researcher asked participants to share the study information with other potential participants and requested permission to save their contact information for use in verification.

### **Transcription**

The audio of each interview was recorded using a phone or computer. Within a few weeks of the first interview, the researcher began transcribing the audio, eventually transcribing 12 interviews. A transcription service transcribed the remainder of the interviews. After transcription, the researcher read the transcripts and listened to the audio to confirm accuracy before deleting the audio recordings.

### **Grounded Theory**

A premier grounded theory scholar, Charmaz (2014) wrote *Constructing Grounded Theory* to trace the historical split in grounded theory methods, argue for the constructionist approach, and provide a manual for conducting and constructing grounded theory. Following Charmaz' recommendation, the researcher of this study wrote research memos throughout the research process, and especially diligently throughout the analysis.

After conducting 24 interviews, the researcher began initial coding, where they read through 15 of the interviews and coded instances where participants (1) described actions and processes of significant others that they interpreted as displays of acceptance, and (2) embodied actions and processes of experiencing acceptance. Following this process of initial coding on half of the interview data, the researcher began focused

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coding. Focused coding entailed reading through the selected interviews again, identifying salient and repetitive codes, and coding the initial codes. Notably, focused coding involved writing memos to develop essential codes, which the researcher eventually organized into seven categories, composing three main clusters, which in turn were represented by one core category. Thus, the core category of this study's results encompassed the three clusters and seven categories, all of which were derived from essential codes in the data.

### **Verification**

Two efforts to verify the results of this analysis manifest in this first iteration, and a total of four procedures will characterize the final report of this data. As part of verification for grounded theory analyses, researchers retained a data trail of consistently-written memos that record the formation of categories and clusters. This report also contains the verification of interview transcript reliability. After transcription, the researcher read the transcripts while listening to the audio of the interview. In addition to aiding analysis, this process verified the accuracy of the transcripts.

Two other forms of verification will occur for the final analysis of the full data set. Since these results come from analysis of the first 15 interviews, the researcher will perform verification by comparing the results derived from the first and second halves of the interviews. When the researcher has completed analysis of the second set of interviews, the results from that analysis will be compared to this study's results. This form of verification tests the rigor and resonance of the study's results. The final verification also tests the rigor of the results by sending the core categories, clusters, and categories to the interviewees who agreed to participate in verification. Participants will

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be asked to respond with feedback on whether and which sections of the results resonated with or departed from their experiences. Upon receiving this feedback, the researcher will read the responses, take note of codes or elements of codes that participants were uncomfortable with, and read through the transcripts again (focusing on areas with codes related to the questionable category/ies) to interrogate the validity of the categories. The aim will be to resolve the discrepancies without disrupting the connection between the data and the category.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Results

The analysis answers the research question, yielding a process of acceptance for trans individuals. Experiences of acceptance, as articulated by trans individuals and illuminated via grounded theory analysis, manifest as a core concept containing three clusters and seven categories. The core overarching concept defines acceptance as a *willingness to enact change*, which involves engaging in the process of and doing the work of modifying how one thinks, behaves, and experiences the world to accommodate the trans identity. This change manifests in three clusters: *change in self*, *change in relationship*, and *change in society*. Each of these clusters contain two to three categories, resulting in seven categories that represent specific manifestations of the work or actions that the Other (the individual communicating acceptance to the trans person) must complete to reify the concepts defined in the clusters and optimally communicate acceptance to the trans person.

The core concept of *willingness* necessarily precedes the three clusters, which in turn precede the seven categories. As one materialization of the core concept, the Other must enact change in themselves, including two categories of work: *doing research* and *performing emotional labor*. The disclosure of a trans identity further necessitates changes in the relationship, with the categories of *being available*, *adapting scripts*, and *adapting to the needs of the trans person*. The final cluster further extends the changes to include the Other changing society through the categories of *advocating interpersonally*

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and *externally recognizing trans identities*. Each relationship between the Other and the trans person differs, meaning that various Others might be at different points in the process of acceptance. The context of the person and the relationship determines the amount and level of the work that the Other must do (i.e., which clusters and categories that person must focus on) to engage in the overall process of change described by the core category. The results section begins with an explication of the core concept, followed by three sections that explain and illustrate of each of the clusters and their respective categories.

### **I: Willingness to Engage in Process of Change**

Before the Other can communicate acceptance, the Other has to be willing to work through this process of change. Acceptance of trans identity cannot be a passive or static stance; to communicate acceptance, the Other must actively, deliberately, and to some degree, enthusiastically complete the work of each of the categories. The Other must consistently maintain the activities related to acceptance throughout the work of all of the clusters of communicating acceptance.

In this core category, *willingness* involves both intention and action. The intent of the Other must be a genuine approach towards the trans individual, and the action should indicate a reasonable attempt towards engaging in the process. As Wyatt describes, the Other making a sincere attempt matters more than the resultant actions:

Of course, they messed up my name for a while, because once you know someone as something, you mess it up. Which is another thing, a lot of people get really upset when they mess up your name, but like... a trans person can tell if you're trying. Like, if you're genuinely trying, it's not that big of a deal. It's when you just don't try at all--that's when people get pissed. (Wyatt, p. 8)

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Rather than expressing his frustration at his friends' fallbacks, Wyatt approached the subject of messing up with understanding, stressing their perspective of responding to a changed expectation. He follows up this understanding with a caveat that the generosity and grace of his feelings extends only to those who are "genuinely trying" to change their behaviors. However, he does not hold back the ire and frustration he feels with people making mistakes who he perceives are not trying to, or *being willing to change*.

The nature of *willingness* in this context is processual and constant. Throughout the process, the Other always has to be willing to continue engaging, growing, and improving. One manifestation of the constancy of *willingness* is correcting and learning from mistakes. Jackson articulates this phenomenon with an anecdote of their friends' positive response to being the target of a running joke:

Everyone makes jokes that "trans people just explode at me if I misgender them." I don't see any trans people do that. I see more mild irritation and making fun of you for it, but feeling really immensely happy when you make an attempt to do it.... One of my friends from high school is having trouble with pronouns. Whenever she uses the wrong pronouns and I'm with her, I say, "Give me a quarter." We have this fake running quarter jar going. It's kind of freaking fun, but it's also a light way to remind her, "Hey, you should remember this." Her accepting that running joke and actually going along with it – that means something, too. (Jackson, p. 12)

Like Wyatt, Jackson exhibits understanding of the difficulty of changing one's behavior quickly. Despite the playful approach Jackson takes towards correcting their friend when she makes a mistake with pronouns, Jackson stresses both the Other's equanimity in the face of that joking and their effort to improve their actions and continue growing.

If the Other is not *willing* to undergo the processes of acceptance, the trans person faces the choice of either ending the relationship, enduring the rejection, or attempting to lead the Other through the process. Participants expressed a remorseless (though

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certainly defensible) preference for ending relationships. Cutting ties is not a quick and thoughtless eviction, but, as Lucy describes, a painfully necessary sacrifice:

At this point in my life I just feel like I only need people that are supporting me in my life. I don't need anyone trying to bring me down. And I have the power to do that. And I feel like coming out has helped me realize what people are actually my friends and family, [and] which ones are just kind of like “Why are you like this.” I felt that I should just cut that kind of people out because there's enough stress with coming out as trans and everything. I don't need people berating me for who I am. (Lucy pp. 7-8)

In this quotation, Lucy asserts power over her relationships; when someone is “bringing her down,” or refusing to accept her identity, she concludes that continuing the relationship through the rejection is less hurtful than ending the relationship. Although the cutting off of contact might seem harsh, trans persons’ unhesitating decisions to do so reflect both the importance of acceptance for trans people and the vitality of the Other being willing to engage in the process of change.

In the third scenario described above, the trans person might lead the Other through the process of change to achieve acceptance. If the relationship is significant to the trans person and they have the energy to endure the rejection while leading them through the process, they might continue the relationship. Jackson describes the rare experience they had guiding their brother along as he underwent the process of change:

[My brother] didn't believe me at first, but slowly, I think I got him to change. Now he genders me properly most of the time and uses my pronouns right... It was only really later that he said a couple things about not believing “nonbinaries” existed that we got into a really big argument (p. 2) ... Eventually, after we talked a lot more about it, he started believing me; I told him how about how I experience dysphoria and how being nonbinary feels to me. He started to believe me. At least now, he makes a conscious effort to gender me correctly, even when other people around me don't. (Jackson, p. 9)

Because this relationship with their brother was extremely significant to Jackson, they were willing to endure the rejection, lead the Other through the process of change, and do

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the *emotional labor* of guiding them to acceptance. Despite their *willingness* to do so in this circumstance, expecting trans people to lead all significant Others through the process of change places an unreasonable pressure on them. For realistic and fair outcomes, the Others must undertake the challenge of working through the process of change for themselves. Although the amount and nature of the change varies according to the Other's personality and the context of the disclosure of trans identity, the changes that the Other experiences can have three manifestations: *change in self*, *change in relationship*, and *change in society*.

### **II: Change in Self**

Simply being willing to accept the trans person and wanting to undergo the process are not enough to communicate acceptance. Taking the steps to actually and actively change is essential. The experience of trans identity often features growth or change; Others who appropriately respond to this aspect of the experience will actively engage in change of themselves as well. A lack of change begets a crumbling of the relationship since trans individuals often prioritize their well-being over maintaining relationships with those who do not respect their identity. Two categories encapsulate the work that the Other does to achieve the *change in self* that denotes acceptance: *research* and *emotional labor*.

#### **Research**

One important element of the work that the Other can engage in to communicate acceptance is *doing research*. Being educated about the person's experiences as a trans person—about what being trans is, means, and looks like—as well as researching the specifics of their identity communicate interest in their personhood and identity. More

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importantly, they showcase a respect for the trans person by taking the load of explanation from their shoulders. Just as Others cannot rely on the trans person to pull them through the process, they cannot rely on the trans person to be the expert educator for everyone in their lives. Answering simple questions and correcting harmful misconceptions becomes exhausting for a trans person, especially if they must repeatedly answer the same questions and correct the same misconceptions. Therefore, the Other must research in order to change the way they view gender in general as well as changing the way they perceive of the trans individual's gender.

The Other must change the way they view gender to fully communicate acceptance to trans individuals. By researching trans identities and expanding their view of how gender functions in the world, the Other can better understand what the trans individual's gender means to them. *Doing research* removes the pressure on the trans person to always have answers and repeatedly act as an educator. Wyatt suggests Google as a resource:

Google's a thing... of course, ask for specific things like pronouns and all that stuff. But past that, I promise you they've answered those same four questions to thirty different people. Just Google and don't make them answer it again. (Wyatt, pp. 21-22)

Wyatt expresses the pressure of having to answer the same questions for the Others in his life. He offers Google as a resource for Others to use—while they can ask some specific questions that relate to individual preferences of the trans person, they should do preliminary research to understand the basics of trans experiences before asking about those specifics.

Regardless of how someone understands gender in general, they must specifically modify how they view the trans person themselves. Even if the Other has a good

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understanding of trans identities and how they exist in the world, they must adapt their perception of that individual from the gender the Other thought they were to the gender they are. For Kai, understanding their gender is one way that Others could support their trans\* identity<sup>4</sup>:

I genuinely think that literally just changing the way that you think about gender—especially that individuals' gender—is the best thing that you can do, because then the pronouns and the names will come with that. (Kai, p. 10)

Moving past simply expanding the way one perceives of gender functioning in the world, Kai asserts that Others must embrace a change in how they perceive of the trans person. Changing the self in terms of how the Other perceives of the trans person's gender viscerally validates their gender.

*Doing research* can be a complex endeavor. The process not only involves Others reading about trans identities and revising how they perceive of gender in the world, but also implementing that greater understanding into their daily life. Jordan even calls cisgender people to question and interrogate the reasons for their own gender:

I hope everybody questions their gender. I hope everyone wakes up. I hope everybody wakes up and [asks themselves], "Why do I put on slacks and this button up? Why do I put on this tie? Why do I put on this dress?" I think realizing it's okay for people who don't feel that way [is important]. Women have penises and men have vaginas. Queer disabled people, people of color. People are people; there's a lot of people in this world. I think we need to open up our eyes and our paperwork and our red tape and realize how much is going on and get rid of all this shit. (Jordan, p. 14-15)

By encouraging people to question their own gender and the way they perform that gender, Jordan hopes they will better understand the complexity of gender. Jordan

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<sup>4</sup> The asterisk in the word "trans\*" was first used in 1995 by GLAAD, an organization dedicated to advocating for LGBTQ+ rights and representation (trans\*, 2018). The trans community is currently engaged in a debate about whether "trans" or "trans\*" better represents the community. Since some of my participants stressed the importance of the asterisk for their identity, I retain the asterisk if the participant described the asterisk as their preferred method of spelling.

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ultimately hopes that reflecting on gender will result in more openness to and appreciation for the diverse struggles of trans individuals. Their comments about people of color and people with disabilities prove that Jordan hope Others will “open their eyes” to the different trans experiences that exist; they hope that recognizing the struggles of trans individuals (through self-reflection and/or research) will diminish the struggles trans persons face. Broadening the scope with which one views gender in the world, and specifically, the trans individual’s gender, results in a *change in self*. Facilitating this evolution, *research* is one act of work that communicates acceptance.

### **Emotional labor**

A second actionable way to change oneself in order to communicate acceptance is through *emotional labor*. While having a significant person in one’s life come out as trans can be a life-altering experience, the *emotional labor* of managing one’s feelings about this disclosure should not be the duty of the trans individual. The Other putting the focus of the relationship on their own emotional processing (rather than on that of the trans person) is frustrating. Marion recounts processing emotions with their partner as they were coming to terms with their gender:

Being able to have people not feel like me coming out is something that’s going to change something about their life, and making it more about them and their suffering through it. That’s the other thing. When you come out, obviously, there’s a grieving process for friends and family, but you shouldn’t be processing that grief with the person who’s come out as trans because that’s not their burden. You need to process that with somebody else. I felt like I was having to process grief with my partner at the time. That was frustrating. (Marion, p. 14)

Marion describes the importance of The Other coming to terms with the trans person’s gender identity, and whatever feelings of grief for the loss they may be experiencing without encumbering the trans individual with the *emotional labor* associated with

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working through those feelings. If the Other does their own *emotional labor*, the trans person is no longer required or expected to support them—especially considering that the trans individual is likely in need of support themselves.

The Other can improve the trans person's experience of coming out by doing their own *emotional labor* in a separate situation, rather than causing them to repeat painful conversations with a variety of people. When the Other did *emotional labor*, Andrew says he felt a difference in the relationship:

I also really appreciated when I could tell that the other person had done some emotional processing about their experience of me coming out to them—not with me. Like with another friend, or whatever. Like when I can tell that they had either thought about what I had said or thought about my coming out and processed that separately from me. Because I think that gets really overwhelming having the same conversations with so many people. (Andrew, p. 8)

In Andrew's experience, Others who worked through their emotions with their own support system contributed to his comfort. With the inherent stress and vulnerability of coming out as trans, Andrew was relieved by the diminished pressure that resulted from those people who worked through their own emotions rather than anticipating that the trans person would work through those emotions with them.

One essential way that Others can engage in *emotional labor* is by recognizing that the trans person's negative experiences will be more severe than the Other's emotional responses. Recognizing the suffering that trans people tend to experience allows the Other to engage with the trans person and prioritize the trans person's feelings. Penelope describes one of the most affirming coming out experiences she had:

Really, you're telling someone one of the most personal things about you. So, it's like, the first thing I would like to hear is "Are you okay," I think it's those people that ask that who get it. (p. 14) ... Realizing that the vulnerability of the trans person, for me, it was like, I'm telling you, like this is my most vulnerable moment right now. And I think just realizing that, and it's not all about rainbows

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and pride flags, but it's truly, you're telling somebody the most intimate thing about yourself. And just hearing that "Are you okay," (Penelope pp. 16-17)

Penelope was strongly impacted by an experience of someone immediately inquiring about her well-being. Being aware of trans experiences and adapting how the Other acts in response to how those experiences can cause suffering for trans individuals helps the trans person know that the Other comprehends and respects the difficulty of their position. When the Other recognizes and elevates the importance of trans person's experiences, and especially, the vulnerability necessary for them to disclose their identity, the Other shows they appreciate the intensity of the challenges the trans person faces.

Expecting the trans person to perform *emotional labor* is harmful. Especially when the *emotional labor* is characterized by questions or comments from non-close relationships or that needlessly disrupt their everyday life, trans people are often uninterested in deep conversations with strangers about their gender. Kai differentiates between the different "spaces" they inhabit:

If I'm not in an educator space, if you ask me questions about why, I don't really have an answer for you. I don't really want to answer that question because I'm just trying to go about my day or buy a coffee or something. I don't want to tell you what being non-binary means to me. (Kai, p. 9-10)

Paying attention to whether or not a trans person is in an "educator space," like presenting a talk about gender, can help determine the appropriateness of asking questions about gender. As Kai describes, when they are buying a coffee or otherwise living their day-to-day life, they do not want to engage with strangers about their personal experiences of gender.

Another form of *emotional labor* that can often be foisted onto the trans person is the usurping of attention. When a trans person is enduring the often difficult and

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uncomfortable experience of coming out, the Other should not redirect attention to their own concerns. The experiences the Other has are perhaps exclusively less challenging than the trans person's experience of identifying their gender and sharing that identification. The Other must recognize that difference and extend it to realize that they cannot focus on themselves; their feelings and their struggles are valid, and should be processed—but the focus ought to be centered on the trans person. Penelope recounts the frustration she feels when her coworkers usurped attention:

I think a lot of people I've told, especially at work, turn it into them. "Well, I don't know how I'm going to do this," like "Oh, it's going to be hard for me" Great, like it was really hard for me, *Alec*. That, I think is some of the most unaffirming stuff, just like, "Okay..." Tell somebody and have them deal with it on their own if they've got a problem with it, but don't do it to my face. (Penelope, p. 12)

By turning the attention to their own struggle to adapt to the trans person's gender, Penelope's coworkers minimized her pain and strength. When they avoid placing the trans individual as the center of the conversation of coming out, Others force the trans individual to undergo *emotional labor* for the Other, rather than the reverse, which is both more necessary and more appropriate. The exhaustion of constantly performing other people's *emotional labor* is overwhelming. To ease that burden, the Other can engage in their own *emotional labor* to develop themselves and express their acceptance for the trans person.

### III: Change in Relationship

In addition to the change to the self that must occur to communicate acceptance, the relationship also shifts to accommodate the new identity. When an important personal identity changes, the way people interact with that individual must shift to recognize that change. Failing to adjust how the Other interacts with the trans person

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delegitimizes their gender identity. The *change in relationship* cluster has three categories. The work that the Other can do to realize the necessary *change in relationship* cluster are *being available*, *adapting scripts*, and *adapting to the trans person's needs*.

### **Being Available**

Although availability is an action that is generally good practice for promoting healthy relationships, this category requires both a more concentrated attention and a unique manifestation when applied to maintaining strong relationships with trans people. As JT claims, *being available* for the trans person, just as a typical friend would be, can alleviate their feelings of stress:

What really, really helps is having someone to go to when you're having issues—or you're just trying to cope with other things going on your life on top of being part of the LGBT+ community. (JT, p. 2)

Since being trans can act as a stressor, but not necessarily the only stressor for a trans person, trans people require the support of significant others. *Being available* for whatever the trans person requests, whether simply discussing their experiences or engaging on a deeper level, helps them endure the struggles of having a marginalized identity.

Due to the uncertainty of acceptance that trans people face, they often feel doubt about whether their significant others truly accept their identity. The Other can make themselves available by simply checking in and reaffirming their acceptance and commitment to the relationship, assuaging doubt in the Other's acceptance. As Andrew describes, a simple action can ameliorate the trans person's self-doubt and suffering:

[I needed] close friends that would check in--checking in every month or two, especially early on and after I had just come out to them. Like not necessarily

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with a question, like “How's that going,” even. Just like:” Hey, it’s been a little while since we checked in and I just want to let you know that I'm still here for you if you ever want to talk.” Like the open-door situation that lets me know that they're still there if I do want to talk. The thing is, I think that it's easy to get—not necessarily introverted, but really in your own head. Or I found that it was easy to be in my own head and not want to reach out, so hearing from people that they're still there was a helpful reminder. (Andrew, p. 11)

Andrew expresses the self-doubt he began to experience, which led him to be more likely to cut off contact with even his close friends. His testimony asserts that *being available* is not only a passive endeavor; rather, Others must actively reassert their acceptance through periodically reaching out to the trans person to express their acceptance through availability.

Beyond the friendship practices of *being available* to respond to the person’s requests and routinely checking in with them, availability as acceptance also requires specific manifestations for trans individuals. Particularly, for relationships with trans people, *being available* requires that the Other practice an openness and (if requested) an active presence as the trans person works through understanding their gender. Some trans individuals experiment and change their minds about what identity, name, pronouns, and presentation work best for them. For these trans people, Others should not simply acquiesce to these changes, but also *be available* to play an active role in experimenting and “trying on” different gender markers and behaviors. These manifestations include an openness to talking about the person’s gender experiences, experimenting with gender expressions, and facilitating gender presentation. If the trans person is still working towards understanding their identity, Others might be asked to help them work through their thoughts. Charlie asserts that the Other must engage through these thoughts to act without judgement:

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In my experience, friends always are [involved in understanding identity] because they're the group that you can just tell "I think I'm going to use these pronouns." They're the group that's okay with you being like "Those pronouns don't work," and they won't judge you for it if they're good friends. (Charlie, p. 2)

When Charlie was still trying to discover their gender, they turned to their friends. Their friends making themselves available to discuss Charlie's gender without judgement demonstrated their acceptance. Charlie's friends made themselves available further by exhibiting a willingness to experiment with them to help find what gender terms worked right for them. While working through these thoughts, friends who are available to "try on" gender by experimenting with different names, pronouns, or terms help show the person's acceptance. For Harper, this experimentation led to a feeling of comfort in their gender identity:

Whether it's "Hey, can you use these different pronouns, I just want to try them out and see if they fit." I had to do that. I did that with they/them. Because I was scared. I did it with he/him. And now, those are so good. (Harper, p. 20)

Because of the fear Harper felt, they were hesitant to ask friends to use different pronouns. However, the friends that allowed them to experiment assuaged that fear, leading to their realization that they/them and he/him pronouns were most comfortable for them.

Even when a trans person has discovered their gender and feels confident in that understanding, changing how they interact with the world can be difficult. Another manifestation of *being available* communicating acceptance is through facilitating gender presentation. When a trans person tries to manifest their identity, their friends can improve their confidence in that presentation. Penelope's friend helped by complimenting simple changes:

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[One thing that helped with expressing my gender was] when I would just slowly transition, maybe wear a scarf to work or something like that, skinny jeans, [a friend would say] “Oh my god, you look so cute today, you look great.”  
(Penelope, p. 18-19)

Penelope appreciated the way her friend complimented the small changes she made in how she presented her gender. The compliments gave Penelope more confidence to express her known gender. Changing how one performs gender can be difficult, but, like Wyatt describes, Others can act as gatekeepers for gender behaviors:

That’s nice, too, being taught etiquette; men’s bathrooms are weird. You don’t look each other in the eye. Girls bathrooms are so much nicer, like people are kind in there. But yeah, just having a cis friend to teach you the unwritten rules is very important at the beginning. Because you can’t talk in the men’s room a lot of times. It’s just not something you do. (Wyatt, p. 13)

When Wyatt began using the men’s restroom, he was unsure of the expectations for how to behave. His cisgender friend acted as a gatekeeper to inform him about those expectations, which allowed his behavior to shift from what he experienced in women’s restrooms so that he was comfortable with his gender presentation and behaviors in men’s restrooms. A variety of availability gestures, from the general behavior of routine check-ins to the specific behaviors that facilitate understanding and presenting gender, are necessary shifts in relationship function to accommodate the trans person’s gender identity. The simple change in the relationship of increasing expressed availability creates an atmosphere of acceptance for the trans person.

### **Adapting Scripts**

An atmosphere of acceptance also requires addressing issues of language. Changing the language one uses in the relationship has powerful effects on the trans person’s feelings of acceptance. The simplest, and perhaps most obvious way to communicate acceptance

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is through changing the use of pronouns to match the person's preference. Using a metaphor, Marley shows the primacy of correct pronouns:

Whenever my mom or whoever uses the wrong pronoun for me, I take a step back. Every time, I take a step back. Every time. Eventually, there would be this big chasm between us. Every time she or whoever uses my correct pronouns, I take a step forward, and can have authentic connection, and just have my guard down with them. If someone's misgendering me, my guard's up. I can't fully connect with them. Using my pronouns is a huge deal. (Marley, p. 6)

Using a movement metaphor, Marley defines how language has a tangible impact on their relationships. In interactions where the Other uses incorrect pronouns, Marley feels a distance emerge, constructing a wall that inhibits connection. Simple though they seem, pronouns are essential manifestations of adapting the scripts the Other uses to refer to the trans person. Adapting pronoun scripts implicitly communicates acceptance of and respect for the trans person's identity, clearing the way for a genuine connection.

Working to change how one addresses the person must move beyond pronouns to adapt all the gendered words and phrases used to communicate in relationships.

Jackson's mom adapted a script mid-conversation:

My mom is probably struggling most with the language thing. A little while ago, she was patting on my head, and she said "Good g—," she was about say girl, but she didn't. Then she changed it immediately to: "Good individual." That was my favorite thing. (Jackson, p. 11)

After the trans person comes out, the Other must adapt the common words and phrases they use to reflect the person's gender. Jackson was excited by their mom changing the common gendered script "good girl," to "good individual" in reference to their non-binary identity. This change in the relationship permits the Other to show their understanding of the trans identity and the importance of recognizing their gender.

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Even beyond these simple changes of pronouns and gendered language, Others must adapt the complex scripts that are present in and specific to the relationship they have with the trans person. Engaging with the deeply ingrained interactions of the relationship and shifting that language to recognize the trans person's gender communicates a deep concern for their identity. Part of the importance of this identity is exemplifying the effects of the process of changing how the Other perceives of their gender; this category outwardly communicates that change to the trans person by reflecting the Other's understanding in the scripts of the relationship. When River's father adapted his script, they felt acceptance:

There are always people pushing to put you into the gender you were assigned at birth. Also, to be in a straight relationship, because... my dad was always saying "You need to marry a male doctor," (p. 26) ... [I could see him improve over time,] like him no longer wanting me to marry a male doctor, but accepting the fact that he also wants me to marry a doctor regardless of what the gender is. (River, p. 37)

Although River describes a change in script to recognize their sexuality, they also ostensibly associate the experience with people ceasing to push them towards normative gender and sexual identities. Using this example as an illustration of a change in the script their dad uses to discuss their future, River articulates the importance of implementing complex identities into the relational scripts.

Others should endeavor to interrogate their worldview to incorporate whatever changes are necessary to recognize the trans person's identity and match all references to gender with their authentic gender. Wyatt gives an example of how the small manifestations of a person's dead name can have hurtful impacts:

[One affirming thing people can do is] immediately changing phone contacts. That's something that you don't really think about, but if I look down at my

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friend's phone and it still says my dead name, I'm like "Really? That's shitty."  
(Wyatt, p. 10)

Wyatt describes how their friends must incorporate the trans person's gender deeply into their lives, changing all references to the trans person's gender to match the person's gender. Adapting both simple and complex scripts used in discussion with and about the trans person is an essential change that must be made in a relationship to show acceptance.

### **Adapting to the Trans Person's Needs**

Another form of adaptation that must occur to communicate acceptance of the trans person's gender identity is *adapting to the trans person's needs*. This relational change, like *being available*, is a good friendship practice in general, but becomes imperative for the Other to attend to when a trans person confides their identity. Perhaps the most important work in changing the relationship to show acceptance to the trans person, *adapting to their needs* involves allowing them to lead the relationship and dictate the Other's participation in all things related to their gender. This category relates again to *change in self* concepts, but forms a relational manifestation of doing *research* and *emotional labor*. The Other cannot assume they know best or understand everything about the situation, but must exhibit humility; for any and each trans person who comes out to them, they must allow that individual to take the lead and respond to the needs, desires, and expectations they articulate.

The foundation of this category is the recognition of the role of power in relationships. The Other must be willing to forfeit some power to the trans person and implicitly acknowledge their rightful position of power in their own transition and to some degree, in the changes to the relationship. Power can be complex and mutable in a

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relationship—this category does not suggest that the Other must fully submit in all situations to the trans person’s whims. However, in regards to the trans person’s gender experience and the ways both the Other and the trans person interact with the world in regards to their gender experiences, they are unequivocally the authority. The Other must comply with the trans persons’ directives and desires involving their transition and coming out; any power or ego the Other asserts or imposes over the trans person only harms the relationship.

Although the previously mentioned availability of “checking in” still applies, the most beneficial reaction includes allowing the trans person to direct how the Other interacts with the world, and ultimately, how their behaviors change. The swift, enthusiastic agreement to change that Tuesday’s friends exhibited made them feel accepted:

[An affirming reaction is] “Let me call you by your name and not mess it up or question why you asked me to call you by that name, and let me not question why you want to use they pronouns, like I’ll ask you if you want to talk about it, but I just accept that you want to do that, and that’s cool because it’s your life.” That’s what my friends did when I got back; they were all like “Sweet, whatever, we’ll do it.” (Tuesday, p. 6)

In Tuesday’s description of the most affirming reaction people can have to them coming out, they talked about how their friends shifted to accommodate what they needed or wanted without questioning them. While they still leave room for asking if the trans person wants to “talk about it,” Tuesday characterizes affirmation as absolute acquiescence. Without judgement or questioning, their friends definitively and unhesitatingly altered their comportment in response to their desires and needs.

With the current attitudes and rhetoric surrounding trans identities, trans people become vulnerable any time they enter into a conversation about their gender. The

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implicit power dynamic created by this scenario requires the Other in whom the trans person confides to manage power and relinquish it where possible. Displaying a concern for power and endeavoring to reinstitute the trans person's control over the situation creates a better balance of power. Kai shows how recognizing power in a simple introduction can be beneficial:

If they're like "Hi, my name is Ellie, my pronouns are she/her/hers," I'm like "Tight, thank you." That's very affirming because that means you're in the same space that I am, because I'm constantly having to remind people of my name and pronouns, but if you're also telling your pronouns, that levels the playing field, and I'm really into that. (Kai, p. 9)

Although Kai describes a casual interaction, they stress the importance of balancing power during interactions about their gender. Since the dominant, prescribed social scripts for gender favor cisgender people, a simple action cisgender people can do in response to trans identities is normalizing the behaviors they are expected to perform. In this instance, Kai asserting their pronouns ceases to be an anomaly because Ellie asserts hers as well. By leveling the playing field, Ellie addresses Kai's need for a power balance and gives a modicum of power back to Kai.

Addressing issues of power can resolve some of the vulnerability trans people face, but in general, the Other must prioritize their feelings of comfort to communicate acceptance. Many things impact how Others respond to disclosures of trans identities, but regardless of the person's internal processes, attending to the comfort of the trans person improves their well-being and cultivates acceptance. Harper's girlfriend acts as a perfect example of prioritizing the trans person's comfort:

[My girlfriend] lets me express all parts of my gender without judgement, or being rude about it. She's just like "What can I do to make you comfortable." (Harper, p. 7)

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Regardless of what Harper's girlfriend experiences in relation to Harper exploring and finding his identity, she prioritizes his comfort, inquiring about what she can do to nurture that feeling of comfort. This attitude shows Harper his girlfriend's willingness to prioritize his comfort and adapt to his needs. The trans person's needs and level of comfort should direct how the Other speaks, acts, and behaves in relation to the trans person's gender. In particular, the comfort of the trans person supersedes the Other's concerns when approaching that person's coming out.

*Adapting to the needs of the trans person* specifically requires caution and attention regarding their coming out. When, how, why, and to whom a trans person comes out is their prerogative. Due to the sensitive nature of a trans identity, many trans individuals will carefully manage when and to whom they come out. The composition of his friend and family groups impacted Wyatt's decisions to come out:

I wasn't too scared because all of my friends were some sort of queer, which is kind of how it goes. So, I knew most of them would be pretty chill with it. It was mostly—coming out to my family was a little rough, because my family is pretty conservative. (Wyatt, p. 7)

Because of the culture of his friend group, which was explicitly open to trans identities, Wyatt felt comfortable coming out to them. He expressed his lack of fear, which he contrasts with coming out in his family's "conservative" culture. This culture influenced Wyatt's decision to come out and his comfort in coming out, which was significantly higher in his "liberal," "queer," friend group than in his conservative family.

The Other should follow the trans person's lead—more importantly, their directions—for how and to whom they can reference their trans identity. Some trans people are more comfortable being out than others; some might be protecting themselves from non-obvious outcomes like disownment; some are not ready to disclose their

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identity in all areas of their lives. Managing coming out is highly personal for a trans person, and respecting their wishes for how to advance is a necessary precursor to providing them adequate support. For Penelope, coming out slowly was essential:

I spent two years—the better part of a year and a half, two years—building up a support system so I knew who was supportive and who was not. My family and I had a falling out by this time, too. I haven't talked to my parents in two and a half years or so. So, you know, a long process for me. And that's kind of what I wanted to do. (Penelope, p. 12)

Because of her position in life, she waited until she had a supportive foundation beneath her before gradually broadening the scope of her disclosure. Following what the trans person wants or needs from the Other gives power back to the trans person, allowing them to dictate how they come out. This attention to power leads the trans person to a more comfortable space, so acceptance requires that Others diligently consider how their role in (or restraint from) outing the trans person can better fulfill the trans person's needs and requests.

The Other's duty in coming out is not to impose their ideas by berating the trans person or by subverting their power. Instead, prioritizing the trans person's comfort, the Other should allow the trans person to control and manage their coming out in whatever way they wish, playing a role only if the trans person solicits their assistance. Although not in a discreet manner, Wyatt intentionally controlled and managed his coming out:

I came out to the people that I was really close friends with.... I didn't want to have to explain myself to every single one of you. Just know it before I get there and respect it, and then that's it.... [So] I just told [four] specific people, like "Hey, if you wanna spread the word, also." ... And they were like "Yup," And they got it done... I was trying to think of ways where I wouldn't have to tell everybody, because I was like "That sounds like hell on earth." (Wyatt, pp. 4-5)

Wyatt requested that some of his friends help him come out as trans because he felt that the experience of coming out to all the people in his circle sounded abysmal. The friends

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who came out for Wyatt followed his instructions to help him manage coming out. To help alleviate the overwhelming pressure and discomfort of the experience, the Other can facilitate in the ways the trans person asks, but not beyond. *Adapting to the needs and desires of the trans person* by following their directions, considering how to address power dynamics, and allowing them to manage their coming out all contribute to effectively communicating acceptance.

### **IV: Change in Society**

Taking the first steps of acceptance are paramount. Even to uphold a semblance of a relationship with the trans person requires some degree of evolution of self and the relationship. To move beyond this level of relationship maintenance, however, supporters who truly desire to express their full acceptance of the trans person must occupy a role in changing society. While accepting the trans person into the Other's life is meaningful, total acceptance requires expanding the rights and opportunities of trans people in the broader world. Actions that promote the well-being of all trans individuals and recognize the experiences of trans individuals delineate a wholehearted acceptance of the trans person and their identity.

#### **Advocate Interpersonally**

The Other can enact a change greater than themselves and their relationship through interpersonal advocacy. *Advocating* for trans individuals both in their presence and beyond helps communicate to the trans person that the Other is invested in their identity and in improving the way people with their identity experience the world. For many trans individuals, strangers constantly make mistakes referring to their gender or to intentionally harm them due to their gender identity. For many of these interactions, the

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trans person will deal with that ignorance or animosity alone; therefore, whenever a supportive Other is with the trans individual and witnesses these mistakes or attacks, their advocacy removes the trans person's responsibility to defend themselves and educate strangers.

When someone questions or threatens a trans person, any supportive Others in the vicinity have a responsibility to intercede. Following previous instructions from the trans person takes precedence; the Other overwhelming their desire to speak with the Other's own protests would ultimately aggravate the situation. Still, the Other can engage in productive ways. They first should act on whatever requests the trans person has previously made, like de-escalating the situation, providing the trans person with an escape, or engaging the person in a conversation. Whether or not a conversation has occurred to give the Other guidance on how to respond, standing up for the trans person—or even trans identities in general—is usually an appropriate response. Marley challenges allies to confront hate in interpersonal situations:

If there's a trans person in the room and someone else says something trans-phobic, don't wait for the trans person to say something. That's scary as hell and could put them in danger. You could be like "Hey, that's trans-phobic," or "That's fucked up," "Not only girls do that," whatever. Use your backbone. (Marley, p. 17)

Being trans and standing up for oneself is terrifying, since violence is a real possibility. Marley gives examples of short, supportive phrases that someone can say in response to hateful or ignorant comments. Even if the trans person has asked Others to allow them to handle such situations, or asserts a desire to address a specific situation themselves, the Other can still offer short verbal or non-verbal support for the trans person's position.

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When a trans person is in a frightening or hurtful scenario, their friends can exhibit their acceptance by standing up for them. When friends do not advocate for trans causes in front of the trans person, the conviction of their acceptance becomes dubious.

Wyatt poignantly describes this feeling as remembering the silence of his friends:

I always remember my friends' silence more than anything anybody ever said to me. And that's... it always rings true because there's always going to be assholes, but if your friends don't stand up for you, that's what really hurts. Because if you don't feel like you can stand up for yourself, and your friends are just like [whistles nonchalantly], while you're getting like stomped on... Friends are a lot more important than what assholes say, I think. (Wyatt, p. 12)

Failing to defend the trans person against doubt or antagonism foment a painful dilemma for the trans person: standing alone against aggression or enduring the pain of hearing their identities disparaged. Wyatt's stress on the indelible memory of silence from his friends illustrates the enormous consequence of interpersonal advocacy.

The significance of *advocating* for trans persons does not diminish with the absence of the trans individual. Others who want to fully express acceptance must incorporate interpersonal advocacy into their response patterns even—perhaps especially—if the trans person is not present:

If I'm not in the room and someone is misgendering me or something like that, [an active ally should be] correcting them. (Marion, p. 8)

Actively allying oneself to the trans community, Marion specifies, is defending their identity even outside of their vicinity. Witnessing someone insulting or disparaging trans identities without addressing their comments or engaging with their attitude indirectly harms trans individuals. Standing up against people who disparage their identity, or trans identities in general, helps the trans person:

[To be an active ally is] to stand up for them when no one else is around. (Tuesday, p. 7)

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Tuesday echoes Marion's assertion of the importance of standing up outside of the trans person's presence. Each time the Other engages ignorance or criticism of trans identities, they have the potential to not only do the educating work for the next trans individual that person encounters, but also to provide the example of resistance for any onlookers. Any act that shifts the offending individual's view of trans people to be more accepting contributes a valuable change to society. Offering that resistance will slowly alter socially acceptable behavior to exclude reviling trans identities. While situations vary, and the Other must also consider their own safety, anytime the Other engages with skeptics in secure environments can result in one fewer dangerous situation for the trans person. Interpersonal advocacy fosters a more accepting society that explicitly welcomes trans people.

### **Recognize Trans Identities Beyond Trans Spaces**

While related to interpersonal advocacy, the recognition of trans identities beyond trans spaces warrants a distinct category. Rather than simply responding to peoples' derision of trans identities, this work is more proactive and preemptive; efforts to *recognize trans existence* are the easiest and most productive work that can be done before a trans person comes out to the Other. Even if the trans person is out, supportive Others should work to acknowledge and recognize the diversity of gender in the world beyond their relationship with a trans person. This recognition not only shows the trans person that the Other cares about and accepts trans identities, but also improves the experiences of other trans individuals. When the Other makes references to trans identities, they implicitly communicate acceptance of gender diversity, as well as increase trans visibility.

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Some of the pressure of coming out can be alleviated by making positive references to trans identities, and therefore communicating an implicit acceptance. Since the trans person has no guarantee of a positive response, each instance of coming out is stressful. By *recognizing trans identities* and expressing a prior knowledge and acceptance of diverse gender identities, the Other facilitates a comfortable coming out.

Marley reiterates the importance of taking action to cultivate social acceptance:

Being an ally requires action. There's interpersonal ally when you're an ally to your trans nephew or something. If you really want to be an ally to that person, you'll not only be supportive and advocate on their behalf to the rest of the family; you'll also advocate for trans rights in the world. We need that, and we need cis gender people to leverage their privilege and to leverage their power to go to their health insurance or go to their workplace and say "Hey, does our health insurance cover trans healthcare? What's our bathroom policy? What's our dress code? What do our forms look like? Can people identify preferred name? Can people specify their pronouns?" Being an ally requires action. If you're just okay with gay people or trans people, you're not really an ally. You're just not an asshole. If you want to be an ally, you have to do stuff. It can be uncomfortable at first, but as uncomfortable as it is for cis/straight people to venture into active ally-ship, that discomfort or "Oh, this is awkward," it's a thousand times that for the trans person who's gone through life as a trans person. (Marley, p. 17)

Marley defined allyship as action, claiming that being an ally for trans people requires more than vocalizing support to the trans person, or to others. Passive acceptance, for Marley, is not enough. To be "not an asshole," is the bare minimum, but does not encompass all that a trans ally can and should do. They argue that allies to the trans community should exercise privilege to enact progressive changes in their world. When a cisgender person asks for change, their attitude and reputation might be at stake, but when a trans person asks for change, they could be jeopardizing their personhood. Using both the influence of being cisgender and the power of being an employee or customer of an organization, cisgender people can expand the opportunities of trans people. Taking

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these actions shows acceptance, but also increases the number and quality of places that a trans person can experience.

In small ways, the Other can recognize that gender is not binary or immutable. By bringing these thoughts to the forefront of a social conversation, the Other attributes normalcy to this recognition, ultimately lowering the threshold for a trans individual to seek greater societal respect for their identity. Tuesday suggests ways allies can *recognize trans identities*:

[Put] your pronouns—even if you use she/her/hers—on your [email] signature so it becomes normalized. Or even, when you do group introductions, say “Hey, can we do names and pronouns?” (Tuesday, p. 7)

A simple action like putting pronouns on an email signature means the trans person’s use of pronouns on their email signature will be less of an anomaly. Including pronouns into introductions similarly gives the opportunity for a trans person to piggyback on that suggestion and assert their pronouns, rather than having to initiate the discussion on using correct pronouns.

These small actions help bring awareness; larger efforts to focus social attention on trans issues and gender diversity can also communicate acceptance. If the Other encourages a greater social awareness of trans identities, the trans person will be less likely to have to engage and educate people on trans issues. One of Wyatt’s professors exhibited the larger efforts people can make to hasten acceptance:

[My professor is] this big, burly, bearded, cis dude, and he doesn’t know shit. And I started explaining it to him, and since that, he has been... we’ve had a lot of talks, and he’s started... we actually held a talk at a theatre festival, about being trans in the theatre. And he set that up because he wanted to help bring awareness to that. (Wyatt, p. 15)

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This description focuses on a person growing and building their knowledge of trans issues; even someone who had no knowledge of trans issues, by asking questions and talking about trans experiences, was able to expand both their own knowledge and open space for discussing trans issues. This professor's efforts to bring awareness of trans experiences in the theatre community showed Wyatt that he not only cared about Wyatt's experience, but also about improving how trans people experience the world.

Seeing representation of trans people provides a helpful opportunity for trans individuals to identify with others who experience the world in a similar way. Making positive references to or increasing exposure of trans people communicates acceptance. *Recognizing trans identities* increases their visibility, which eases the burden trans people experience when coming to terms with their identity. The visibility of a trans woman showed Penelope how to enact her identity:

Jen Richards is my trans goddess. She is the one that—I found some of her videos on YouTube, and she's a year before me. She started transitioning the year before I did, so seeing her out there and seeing her visible and seeing the way she talked about it herself or those videos on YouTube, that helped me progress into my own identity. (Penelope, p. 18)

Seeing someone else experiencing the same traumas and successes she was enduring helped Penelope blossom and grow into her femininity and trans identity. By advancing and recognizing these representations however possible, the Other can help facilitate visibility that inspires and fortifies trans people.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### Discussion

The vitality of acceptance for people who identify as trans cannot be overstated. Social support is important to all people, and particularly for trans individuals. Support of the trans person (including specific support of their marginalized identity) improves the person's mental health and general well-being. Despite the positive influence of acceptance, few resources for communicating that acceptance exist. Little to no research-based definitions and support materials related to acceptance are readily available for supportive Others to reference when attempting to communicate their acceptance to the trans person. This study, by interviewing trans individuals, used grounded theory analysis to articulate the actions and processes that trans individuals and the Other undertake in communicating acceptance.

This analysis yielded the core category of *willingness to engage in the process of change*, which manifests in three clusters. The clusters, *change in self*, *change in relationship*, and *change in society*, represent the spheres in which change must occur to communicate acceptance. Finally, the seven categories that compose the clusters are the *work*, or actionable steps that the Other can take to communicate acceptance. For *change in self*, the categories are *research* and *emotional labor*. *Change in relationship* involves *being available*, *adapting scripts*, and *adapting to the needs of the trans person*. To fully communicate acceptance, the Other must also enact *change in society* with the categories of *advocating interpersonally* and *recognizing trans identities beyond trans spaces*.

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These actions, or categories, contribute to changes in self, relationship, and society that are necessary for the Other to engage in when showing acceptance of the trans person.

These findings have significant theoretical implications and practical applications. The study limitations pave a path forward for future research on trans acceptance and experiences.

### **I: Grounded Theory**

In the past, grounded theory has served as a valuable tool for understanding the actions and processes that individuals go through to make meaning from their experiences. This study's application of grounded theory takes a unique approach of simultaneously investigating two sets of actions and processes. First, the actions and processes the trans participants are experiencing while situating the behaviors of their support system along the scale of acceptance and rejection. Second, this analysis extrapolates the actions and processes that the Others go through, albeit from the trans individual's perspective. This route was necessary for this particular study, since part of the study's goal was to give as much power as possible to the trans participants in communicating their ideas.

The successful extrapolation of a rigorous process which Others must undertake when communicating acceptance shows that grounded theory can successfully extend from analyzing the meaning-making of the interviewee to include analyzing *accounts* of actions and processes as perceived by the interviewee. Grounded theory has a reputation for a strong link between the findings of the analysis and the data from the study. This study's unique application of grounded theory gives precedence to a strategy for ensuring marginalized perspectives are included and given voice in studies related to their

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experiences, even despite studies addressing actions and processes of the people surrounding that group. Especially considering the importance of recognizing how power is distributed in the case of trans individuals and marginalized groups in similar positions, this revelation gives greater power to grounded theory as a useful tool for future studies addressing disenfranchised populations.

### **II: Social Support**

These results have further theoretical implications for the study of social support. Previous research defines social support as “accurate understanding of identities, instrumental help in fulfilling identity-related goals, and general perceptions of support for particular identities” (Weisz & Wood, 1993, p. 418). This list relates closely to this study’s results: “accurate understanding” must be attained by *doing research*; “instrumental help in fulfilling identity-related goals” in this context involves *being available* for experimenting with gender expression and presentation; and “general perceptions of support for particular identities” should be expressed through the categories in the *change in society* cluster. These correlations firmly situate this study within social support research, though specific to trans identities. However, the operationalization of social support thus far is limited to “perceived support for identities that are rated as important to a particular individual,” without further dissecting the nuances of expressing social support (Weisz & Wood, 1993, p. 418). This study describes social support in a new manner, as an active process that necessitates deliberate and focused work. The overarching perception of social support as a complex, but static state simplifies how the actions of Others must change and grow along with the person

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being supported. This study influences the study of social support by showing that social support is a dynamic, continual, and Other-focused process.

Social support, as a process, requires a significant amount of self-contained work. Previously, social support was perceived solely as a relational experience. In reality, social support contains relational elements, but is complexly related to the Other's internal processes beyond the relationship. As evinced by the three clusters of change in this study, social support includes action and work not only at the relational level, but also directed at the self and society. While the relational elements are certainly vital, this development clarifies social support as being partially oriented at the self. Acting towards the person in a way that shows support is important, but the Other must do more than act supportive; effective and true social support is characterized by work on oneself. The self-labor of this study, *research* and *emotional labor*, are specific to trans identities, but the quality of working on oneself to change and improve (however this relates to the identity being support) applies to a variety of social support scenarios.

### **III: Ambiguous Loss**

In the context of trans identities, some of the self-contained labor necessary for complete social support is *emotional labor*. As Norwood (2012) articulates, the family members of trans individuals may experience feelings of grief or ambiguous loss when the trans person comes out to them. While certainly valid and consequential emotions, the Other's emotional experiences should not overshadow or overburden the trans individual. Research into how the family and friends of trans individuals process their transition is undoubtedly valuable, but the findings of this study reveal that Others must do their own *emotional labor* to cope with these feelings. By managing their feelings of

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loss and grief either alone, with other individuals, or with a therapist, Others show an appropriate level of concern for the trans person in their lives.

These results inform ambiguous loss research since the previous iterations of research into experiences of ambiguous loss have focused on the grief and discomfort of the family members of the trans individual. This research, despite its resonance, must extend to consider the impacts of emotions such as ambiguous loss on the trans person. Especially in popular culture, the experiences of trans people are often overshadowed by the experiences of loss, betrayal, discomfort, or comfort expressed by those surrounding the trans individual. While deconstructing and understanding these responses is a valuable and necessary endeavor, research into ambiguous loss and other emotions felt by the people surrounding the trans person should at least partially reorient to address the perspectives and experiences of trans individuals. Without suggesting a reconstruction of research on ambiguous loss, the findings of this study that emphasize the Other doing their own *emotional labor* suggest that ambiguous loss researchers should integrate this knowledge into their approach to the topic.

### **IV: Gender Minority Stress and Resilience**

The presence of significant findings for this study indicate that the work Others do can have a profound impact on the trans individual's sense of self and well-being. In general, the psychological schema for managing gender minority stress has two overarching views: subjective, in which the trans individual must assume responsibility for managing the stresses associated with non-normative gender identity by changing their perceptions; and objective, which attributes the stresses to environmental factors and stresses eliminating or ameliorating these harmful factors (Meyer, 2013). The present

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study lends credence to the objective viewpoint, since the behaviors of significant Others can influence the trans individual's levels of stress and resilience. The environmental factor of how others respond to and treat the trans individual can either harm or hurt the trans person's capacity to cope with having a stigmatized identity. This study's *being available* category shows how Others can help the trans individual manage stressors by simply manipulating the environmental factor of their own responses.

Simple steps that change the relationship between the trans person and the Other can have profound influences on the trans individual. Specific to trans identities, gender minority stress and resilience (GMSR) has been used to show the direct relationships that rejection, nonaffirmation, and victimization have with suicidal ideation in trans populations (Testa, Michaels, Bliss, Rogers, Balsam, & Joiner, 2017). This direct relationship implicates these findings, showing how the categories of this study explicitly informs Others how to reduce suicidal ideation, and therefore suicide attempts and deaths from suicide among the trans population. In the context of research on GMSR, these findings can reduce the stress and improve the resilience of trans individuals.

### **V: Power of Language**

The findings on *adapting scripts* corroborate one of Levitt and Ippolito's (2014) clusters. Their study of trans identity formation found that language has the capacity to cultivate acceptance. The importance of adapting the language one uses to describe and interact with trans persons emphasizes the importance of language and interactions in forming reality. Social constructionism emphasizes the joint construction of perceptions and reality, articulating humans' experiences of the world as based on mutual agreement or construction (Hruby, 2001). Researchers have applied social constructionism to

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LGBTQ+ identity formation, focusing on how individuals define sexuality (Sherrer, 2008). Zimman (2018) investigated how voices help construct trans identities, but this study advances these studies further to show that the identity of the trans individual is influenced and formed through their relationships—and in particular, through language.

Levitt and Ippolito's (2014) study found, and this study's *adapting scripts* category upholds, an emphasis on affirming language for trans people. This emphasis in turn reiterates social constructionism's focus on assembling meaning relationally. When trans individuals stress that *adapting scripts* helps reaffirm and reify their gender, they demonstrate social constructionism. The trans person and the Other share in the meaning-making of creating gender identity when they enact *change in the relationship* to recognize and actualize the trans identity. Another part of the *change in relationship* finding that advances social constructionism is the *being available* category. Participants described one facet of acceptance from Others as being open and available for the trans person as they were "trying on," or experimenting with gender. The trans persons who described how indispensable the Others' participation in their gender experimentation was help extend social constructionism into trans identity formation. This does not, however, mean that the existence of trans identities are exclusively a result of social interaction. Rather, these categories contribute to social constructionist theory by showing that how the trans person's identity manifests and how the trans person chooses to express their identity is influenced by their interactions and relationships. The categories of *adapting scripts* and *being available* exemplify social constructionism as the trans person and Others work to create meaning and reality for the people in the relationship.

## **VI: Communication Privacy Management**

One essential finding of this study is the category of *adapting to the trans person's needs*, inherent in which is allowing the trans person to dictate their own coming out. The trans person feels ownership over their identity, and therefore desires to maintain control over disclosures of that identity—both their own disclosures and Others' disclosures of their identity. When this control is subverted, the relationship between the trans person and the Other suffers.

Communication Privacy Management (CPM) Theory explains this finding. As Petronio (2002) describes, disclosures of identity represent sharing the ownership of private information with another person. This sharing results in either implicit or explicit trust that the person will handle that information responsibly, guarding their privacy (Petronio, 2002). The author further articulates that these expectations around sharing identity can lead to problems, or turbulence in the relationship if the rules of disclosure were not negotiated clearly, if someone breaks negotiated rules of disclosure, or if two people follow different privacy rules. CPM has been used to understand coming out for people in the LGBTQ+ community, but like other research on the community, focuses exclusively on the sexuality of coming out (Breshears & DiVerniero, 2015; Helens-Hart, 2017; McKenna-Buchanan, Munz, & Rudnick, 2015; Rubinsky, 2018). This research showcases how CPM can be applied to LGBQ relationships; the present study extends the research to include and address how trans identities relates to CPM.

CPM explains some of the findings of this study, but the results also expand the understanding of CPM in several ways. These results show participants managing the disclosure of their identity, revealing that gender identity, in the case of trans individuals,

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serves as private information. Additionally, this study reinforces the findings of Breshears and DiVerniero (2015), who showed that children whose parents are gay or lesbian did not perceive of their family members' sexual identities as shared information, but private, entrusted information. Trans participants expressed their ownership over the information, even when they had shared that information with others. Trans individuals retain possession of the private information of their trans identity, and Others who are trusted to receive the information do not share ownership, but remain trusted confidants. This perception serves to complicate the sharing of this information, since performative and presentational elements of gender create circumstances that easily translate to privacy dilemmas that lead to relational turbulence.

A second way that these findings expand understandings of CPM is by revealing what factors influence whether or not trans individuals share gender identity information. This iteration of CPM appears to be largely related to cultural expectations for behavior and risk-benefit calculus (although context plays a role as well). First, the cultural expectations of cisnormativity help delineate trans identities as private information. Individuals' family and friend group communication cultures will dictate whether the trans individual is willing to come out. If a friend group expresses openness to trans identities before the trans person comes out to them, (i.e., *recognizing trans identities beyond trans spaces*), this culture increases the trans person's comfort in coming out to them. In contrast, trans individuals are more hesitant to come out to family members or friends who have expressed either disdain for trans identities or generally conservative views. In addition to culture factoring into trans persons' willingness to disclose their identities, risk-benefit calculus also influences this decision. When a trans individual is

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deciding whether or not to come out to someone, they compare what possible benefits or drawbacks there might be for coming out. Finally, trans individuals show concern for context when determining whether and when to come out. In particular, trans individuals, rather than simply responding to the context to determine coming out, actively work to control the context when planning to come out. CPM Theory explains some understandings of trans disclosure behaviors, and in turn, analyzing those behaviors informs a greater understanding of CPM.

### **VII: Visibility and Representation**

The *change in society* cluster demonstrates the importance of visibility and trans representation. When trans individuals experience others recognizing the diversity of gender, they receive vital positive reinforcements of their gender and implicit acceptance. LGBTQ+ people in general struggle with identity formation and disclosure; this study corroborates claims in research that having the possibilities of non-normative gender and sexuality expectations modelled for LGBTQ+ youth results in a “less arduous and lengthy identity formation process” (Kivalanka & Goldberg, 2009, p. 915). Recognition and representation of diverse sexualities has increased in the past decades (Gross, 2001), but trans identities remain underrepresented. Considering the vitality of representation in identity formation represented by this and previous studies, researchers, media companies, and individuals should attend to visibility and media representation, increasing instances of trans and gender non-conforming representations where possible.

### **VIII: Practical Applications**

The practical applications of this research manifest on two levels: organizational and individual. Organizations aimed towards providing support for significant others,

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like PFLAG, can use the findings of this research to improve materials and advice they give to individuals who seek guidance on supporting their trans loved one. Similarly, organizations that advise trans individuals might use these results to help trans people better communicate their needs to loved ones. Distributing resources that articulate the needs or appropriate behaviors of significant others can be easier for the trans person than trying to articulate those needs themselves. Organizations for the significant others of trans individuals and for trans individuals themselves can use the findings from this study to improve communication of acceptance between significant others and trans individuals.

At an individual level, the results from this study can help individuals communicate acceptance for trans individuals, offering necessary social support. These results have a practical application to the personal lives of those people who are trying to communicate acceptance to trans people. The friends and families of trans people who are working towards acceptance might lack direction; the actionable steps provided by the seven categories of this study provide data-based guidance for appropriate and meaningful ways to show trans individuals acceptance and support. While the data for this study shows articulations of acceptance and support specifically for trans identities, the process of acceptance and support might resonate with other non-normative and marginalized identities.

### **IX: Limitations and Future Directions**

The most poignant limitation of this study is the relative homogeneity of the participants. All but two of the participants used in analysis of these results readily identified their race/ethnicity as white, though several offered clarifications or

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complications of their identity. Even considering the full 28 interviewees, only three used primary descriptors that were not white; several offered “white,” as a primary descriptor before complicating their identity with a more specific racial or ethnic identity. Although the nature of this study meant that gender was the paramount consideration in recruitment, the increased recognition of the importance of intersectionality and the need for diverse representation to achieve greater resonance insist that future studies address this limitation, aiming for a more heterogeneous sample.

A second form of homogeneity was the late age of transition for most of the participants. While the participants of this study may be a representative sample of trans experiences, none of the participants had identified their identity at a young age, transitioned pre-pubescence, and lived their authentic gender throughout their childhood into adulthood. Those who recounted stories from their childhood that precluded their trans identity expressed that either ignorance or hostility stopped them from transitioning as a child. While the differences among trans individuals who understood their identities and transitioned as children versus those who transitioned after experiencing puberty and greater levels of socialization are not clearly defined in research, this study bases results in a population of individuals who transitioned either as teenagers or in varying levels of adulthood.

Despite this potential limitation, the process outlined in this study has already shown the capacity to work on a variety of different levels. The process of acceptance and change outlined in this study has the built-in restriction that different individuals, relationships, and contexts might dictate different starting points and different levels and amounts of work necessary for communicating acceptance. This caveat lends rationality

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to a claim that the model would prevail when applied to different populations of trans individuals. Future research should endeavor to consider the perspectives of a wide range of experiences within the trans community.

As the researcher, but also a cisgender white woman, my identity was an important factor that defined the possibilities of this study. This identity influenced how I approached the study in positive and negative ways throughout the project. Initially, recruitment might have been constrained as potential participants might have been wary of my intentions. For both recruitment and during interviews, this difference in standpoints also might have limited the rapport between me and the participants. However, the interviews were also enriched by the difference. Participants were likely more inclined to describe experiences in depth that they might have glazed over with a trans interviewer, assuming they understood and leaving implicit undertones. Another way the difference in standpoints impacted the interviews was my capacity to ask questions that a trans interviewer might have overlooked or ignored because of their closeness to the topic. I identified some areas that might have been seen as obvious and been consequently unobserved by a trans researcher. This value is similar to my capacity to look at and analyze the data with a more dispassionate view. Because I have not personally undergone the same interactions and experiences, I approached the analysis with a relatively unbiased, impersonal perspective. This detachment could have been difficult for a trans researcher. Again, this distance had negatives as well; since I did not experience the intensity of the emotions that a trans person would have, I might have overlooked some comments or codes as trivial, when in reality, they are vital to the trans experience of acceptance. Although my identity had both benefits and drawbacks for

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conducting this study, involving trans individuals in the process of research about their identities would undoubtedly provide some different and important findings. In the future, researchers should endeavor to expand opportunities for research for trans individuals and give them agency over some of the research that is done about trans identities.

Another limitation inherent in the design of this study is the core concept's essential underpinning of *willingness*. Although understanding how to communicate acceptance to trans individuals is a necessary endeavor, the requirement that the Other be willing to engage in the process limits the scope of this study. In the future, researchers should consider the issue of how to manage relationships in which the Other is unwilling to engage in the process and which the trans individual values enough to keep. Researchers should consider effective ways to promote acceptance for trans individuals within those individuals who are either actively unwilling or passively resistant to engage in the process of change.

## CHAPTER SIX

### Conclusion

Social support and identity support are vital for all people; for trans individuals, this support becomes paramount, becoming imperative for maintaining mental health. This study provides a valuable starting point for research that pursues improvements in communication with trans individuals to better promote acceptance, and therefore lower suicide rates. Grounded theory analysis bases this study's findings in interview data that emphasizes the perspectives of trans individuals. Those findings underscore the importance of being willing to engage in the process of change with three clusters, each of which contain categories that represent the actions that presage each cluster. The clusters, *change in self* (with categories of *research* and *emotional labor*), *change in relationship* (with categories of *being available*, *adapting scripts*, and *adapting to trans person's needs*), and *change in society* (with categories of *advocating interpersonally* and *recognizing trans existence beyond trans spaces*), each represent a necessary avenue through which the Other must progress to communicate acceptance to the trans individual.

The implications for this research include a successful application of a unique approach for grounded theory analysis and identifying social support as processual rather than static. A contextualization of ambiguous loss shows the necessary return in research to trans perspectives, and the report reasserts the importance of language in formulating identity. This study also identifies a previously unexplored facet of Communication

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Privacy Management Theory as coming out for trans individuals. A final implication of this study is the importance of visibility and representation for individuals in the trans community. Practically, this study's results can be applied to organizations and individuals attempting to promote and communicate acceptance for trans individuals. Despite a few limitations, this study provides a solid foundation of examples and insights that can propel research into trans communication, identity, and acceptance.

APPENDIX

## APPENDIX

Table of Demographics

Pseudonym <sup>5</sup>	Age	Race/Ethnicity	Assigned Sex	Gender	Location
Andrew	30	White	Female	MTM (Male to Male)	Seattle, WA (Skype)
Charlie	21	White	Female	Agender	Sioux Falls, SD
Harper	19	White/Northern European	Female	Proxvir; Non-binary	Vermillion, SD
Henry	24	Middle Eastern/ Armenian	Female	Male	New York City, NY (Skype)
Jackson	19	White	Female	Grey Gender	Brookings, SD (Skype)
Jordan	23	White	Male	Non-binary; genderfluid	Fort Collins, CO
JT	21	White	Female	Male	Sioux City, IA
Kai	22	White	Female	Genderqueer	Denver, CO (Skype)
Lucy	24	White	Male	Female	Vermillion, SD
Marion	29	Latinx	Female	Genderqueer	Denver, CO
Marley	32	White	Female	Genderqueer; Non-binary	Longmont, CO
Penelope	37	White	Male	Female	Sioux Falls, SD
River	21	White	Female	Non-binary; genderflux	Vermillion, SD
Tuesday	25	White/Arabic & Italian	Female	Trans	Longmont, CO
Wyatt	21	White/German	Female	Male	Sioux Falls, SD

<sup>5</sup> Participants were given the opportunity to select names for use in the report; the researcher assigned a pseudonym to those who declined to select a name.

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