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# Reframing families: Transforming meaning in families with transgender and gender non-binary members

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UNIVERSITY OF CALGARY

Reframing families: Transforming meaning in families with transgender and gender non-binary  
members

by

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A THESIS

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## **Abstract**

Although studies have been conducted on the experiences of transgender and non-binary children, limited research has looked at the parents of these children. This qualitative study explored the transformative learning (Mezirow, 1978) of the parents of transgender and non-binary children by employing the concepts of biographical learning (Alheit, 1994) and holistic learning (Illeris, 2003) as its conceptual framework. The research questions asked: to what extent the parents experienced transformative learning, how they made the cognitive-affective shift in learning, how their own gender identity development informed their interpretations of their child's gender transition, and how they navigated any tensions created within a family. Applying life history methods and methodology, I conducted 2 to 3 interviews with 16 parents of children aged 6 to 29, most of whom recorded their thoughts in journals, and I wrote an autoethnography as a parent of a non-binary child myself. The findings showed that for many parents, holistic learning took place in two phases. First, parents experienced a private phase of transformative learning through a cognitive reframing of the meaning of *gender* and a relinquishing of the emotions that were attached to gender (such as losing your daughter). Then began a public phase where parents learned to advocate for their children in schools, medical offices, or courtrooms. Parents of non-binary children may take longer working through these stages and many participants benefitted from lingering at a particular place of learning as they processed their thoughts or emotions. Furthermore, a parent's personal sense of gender identity did not play a salient role for most parents; rather, their value in authenticity or the ability to be yourself influenced their commitment to their child. A parent's gender identity did play a notable role for two mothers who identified as feminist who found it necessary to revisit their definition of *woman* at the time of their children's transition. These findings provide a better understanding of

the transformative learning of parents of transgender and non-binary children who often need support on this personal and public journey towards championing their children, challenging societal norms, and promoting inclusivity.

## **Dedication**

For Sid and Nyx

When a caterpillar enters its cocoon, its entire body is dissolved into a soup of proteins  
and imaginal cells that are then reconstructed into the form of the butterfly.

This research is dedicated to my children, Sid and Nyx, who built their own cocoons,

deconstructed gender within them, and—

when the time was right—

metamorphosed into the world with

strong, yet delicate wings.

Don't let them touch your dusty wings!

Take lift on all that affirms you.

## **Acknowledgements**

I must first acknowledge that this research could not have been made possible without the candid, unguarded stories of each of my participants. I still see their faces, those bright moments of connection or insight, the tightening of their bodies when expressing their fears, and the tears that glimmered in their eyes as they shared their most painful moments. I have heard your voices and have done my best to honour them here. It is my intention to continue to share your stories until there is no longer a need to.

I thank Dr. Don McNeilly, who told me on multiple occasions that I should pursue a doctoral degree. I did not believe him, at first. Without his assurance, I would not have had the audacity to fill out the application for the University of Calgary. Thank you for seeing in me what I could not see for myself. You have always cheered me on.

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were always the person to go to talk things over, brainstorm new ideas, and laugh freely. What a joy it has been to work with you.

My mom, Peggy White, assisted me when I first arrived back home and she is always my greatest supporter. I still cry on her shoulder now and again, and she makes me feel wholly loved. And to my dad, Jim Condron, who has passed on now, but who instilled within me a love of learning and bettering myself. I still run home to you hoping to make you proud. And to all my family who have been so supportive and always here for me. I have never regretted coming home to be with you again.

Jan Dmowski, you have sustained me through this experience, encouraging me when I was tired or frustrated, ever gently nudging me to move forward. Much of this is new to you, but you appreciate new learning that might challenge tradition. You have been on a learning journey yourself as you have supported me on mine. Thank you for holding my hand.

Both of my children have shown me great courage, and they forge ahead living their authentic lives despite the consequences. I thank Sid for allowing me to share his stories here. Nyx, too, has shown me courage in their life, transitioning in their own time. Somewhere along the way, you both became my heroes.

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## Chapter 1: Introduction

*“‘Kay, I know this isn’t the best way to begin a journal but I feel frustrated and confused. I am frustrated because I want to become more masculine and my mom doesn’t completely understand. . . . Also, Mom’s last talk with me ended with, ‘I want you to find out the meaning of being a woman.’ . . . She doesn’t get it. I have nothing against women. I have girlfriends and I’m attracted to them. I just want to be a man.”*

(Sam, my son, from his journal, 2011, used with permission)

### Introduction

In 2011, developmental psychologist Diane Ehrensaft wrote, “Several years ago parents would sit in my office crying that their child might be gay. These days I am more likely to hear, ‘It’s just fine if he’s gay, but I just couldn’t deal with him being transgender’” (2011). This was my own experience as a parent of a transgender teenage son when he came out to me in 2011. As is often the case with female-to-male (FTM) transgender teens, he originally thought he was lesbian, and as a “modern woman,” I was pleased to do my part in disrupting heteronormative privilege by supporting him. But in his struggle to find himself, my son determined that it was not his sexuality that was in question so much as his gender. In 2011, my understanding of gender variance was limited, and to my own surprise and personal disappointment, I experienced profound cognitive dissonance, as my unconscious assumptions and beliefs about gender (many of which had gone unscrutinized) conflicted with the new information my son faced me with. Consequently, despite my maternal desire to be a support system for him throughout transition, I found myself transitioning alongside him. At times, I admit now reluctantly, I mourned for my daughter. I missed her. I was angry that my child was so selfish. I was annoyed that my new son did not open the door for me like a gentleman, and then I was annoyed that I held such antiquated notions of gentility. Spewing forth from Pandora’s box came a multitude of terms and pronouns, modern ideas that

clashed with ingrained values, and changes that elicited strong, unfamiliar emotions that I could not account for nor quickly resolve. When I attended a support group at Parents, Friends, and Family of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG), I heard parents struggling with accepting their gay or lesbian child, and I thought, “At least you still have your child.” This was unkind, but telling. My child would change physically through hormones and possible surgery, and truth be told, I was not sure who my child would become in the end. Later, as my understanding of gender transformed and I began hearing about the transformative learning trials and triumphs of other parents at PFLAG as a support group facilitator, I realized that we, as parents, were learning about the transformations of our children without understanding the often-metamorphic transformations within ourselves.

Research about parents of gender-expansive children, those who expand beyond gendered norms, does exist in the literature, but “very little research has examined the experiences of parents who seek to affirm the gender identities and expressions of their transgender and gender-nonconforming children” (Kupalanka et al., 2014, p. 357; Coolhart et al., 2018). Moreover, most of these studies have been clinical, focusing more on the parent-child relationship than the parent themselves<sup>1</sup>. The parent’s transformative journey is unique, and some parents have more conflicts to resolve and emotions to work through than others. Some parents, for instance, were committed to fighting for LGBTQ rights even before their own children were born (Ryan, 2016), while others embark on an educational journey often thrust upon them by a desperate child. Often, a parent’s feelings are at odds with their minds as they try to make meaning of the experience. The transition can be traumatic for the parent as they feel the loss of the child they knew and are unready to meet the phoenix arising from their ashes. Of family trauma, Patterson (2002) says:

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<sup>1</sup> In line with the topic of this proposal, I use the singular, non-binary pronouns ‘they’, ‘their’, and ‘themselves’.



In the aftermath of a major adversity, the family's world view may be changed as they reflect on the losses they have experienced. When a world view is shattered by a non-normative experience like the death of a child, the family's ability to heal, grow, and move forward often involves reconstructing a new view of the world that allows them to make sense of such an event. (p. 358)

For some, the transition of the child may feel very much like the loss of the child. But if the child is still alive, then what is the parent mourning? We are a society that is steeped in gendered traditions, gendered relationships, and gendered dreams (Butler, 1990/2007; Ehrensaft, 2011). Gendered dreams and expectations are uprooted, and the parent mourns not the child, but the *daughter* or the *son*. One parent expressed it thusly: "Never, ever had it occurred to me how much I identified not just as being a mother but as being a mother of a daughter. And so it was changing my identity, too, to become the mother of a son" (Field & Mattson, 2016, p. 421). Field and Mattson (2016) shared a touching account of one father's moment of realization that he had lost his daughter:

Before bed, my husband picked up a portrait I had of her and she's just sitting in the portrait with a white frilly dress and a little bow in her hair and a little girly pose. And he just picked up that picture and he just started crying and that was when he got it. Because we didn't have that little girl anymore and he knew it. (p. 423)

For my research, I sought to better understand this moment. What led to his epiphany? What meaning did this epiphany have to the father? The mother? Did the father's personal journey with gender identity development influence his understanding of his child's transition, and if so, how? In what ways did this father transform his understandings of gender and its development? What did he need to experience—what supports, education, paradigm shifts—in order to learn? Also, for those parents who do not have a transformative experience, why not? What were their understandings of gender that made their child's transition easier (if it was) for them? How does the difference between a transgender child and non-

binary child affect the meanings a parent makes? The accounts of parents sharing their transformative learning processes can shed light on the hegemonic forces still at play in society and the layers of gender-related understandings and misunderstandings.

### **Problem Statement**

A growing number of children are identifying as transgender or gender-non-conforming, and their rejection of conventional Western gender norms, i.e., social norms, ethical viewpoints, and belief systems shared by the West, i.e., Europe and countries of European colonial origin (Kurth, 2003), can have significant effects on their families. Often parents experience profound feelings of confusion, anxiety, and even anger as they grapple with unfamiliar ways of thinking about gender while their child navigates the space between female and male (Wahlig, 2015). However, although this experience is becoming increasingly common, surprisingly few theories have accounted for the complexities of families negotiating gender non-conformity (Coolhart et al., 2018; McGuire et al., 2016b). Consequently, parents who travel on this journey see few signposts along the path and are limited in their ability to help their children.

I have suggested above that parents often experience transformative learning while their child undergoes transition. Although many definitions exist for the term “transformative learning” in the field of adult learning, for the purpose of this study I opt for Linden West’s decidedly critical one. He argues,

For [transformative learning] to mean something significant, distinct, and worth preserving in response, it has to encompass fundamental ontological as well as epistemological changes in the learner. Changes such as the capacity to internalize new and radically different ideas and to question the taken for granted and oppressive forces in a life and claim space agentially as well as compose greater personal authority. (West, 2014, p. 165)

This was, I believe, at the heart of the change I experienced and that I witnessed in the stories of those

who attended my support group—epistemological crises over gender and ontological crises over gendered identity. Kegan (2000) suggests that transformative learning is

a shift away from being ‘made up by’ the values and expectations of one’s ‘surround’ (family, friends, community, culture) that get uncritically internalized, towards developing an internal authority that makes choices about the external values and expectations according to one’s own self-authored belief system. (p. 59)

What Kegan’s self-authoring definition lacks, however, is the emotional toll this experience can cost. Certainly, there is a reconfiguration of gendered norms and expectations, but emotionally the daughter/son relationship goes deeper than a mere definition. Transformative learning for parents of gender-expansive children is quite often an emotional journey.

As noted in Coolhart et al.’s (2018) study, “Actual family emotional processing, such as exploring a spectrum of feelings, has been under-documented and even more so, misunderstood” (p. 29; Ehrensaft, 2011; Ellis & Ericksen, 2002; Lev, 2004; Norwood, 2012), and they suggest that more “models of emotional processing for family members be evaluated and understood in context so that clinical models can be created and/or modified and utilized” (Coolhart et al., p. 29). I liken this to an airline’s message to place the oxygen mask on the parent before placing one on the child in an emergency situation. While the needs of both should be addressed, oftentimes guiding the parent towards understanding and stability ultimately benefits the child. My study aims to address these needs through empirical research.

### **Statement of Purpose**

TransFamily theorists (e.g., McGuire et al., 2016b) have taken interdisciplinary approaches to compile data studies of transfamilies, noting common experiences across the cases and then challenging possibly outdated notions of gender such as the essentialist concept of binaries, the social construction of

gender, and developmental theories. As a next step, this study documents the paths parents have taken to navigate the distress, grief, anger, and fear they experienced. How, for instance, does a father repulsed at seeing his son in a dress reach acceptance, and how does his repulsion reflect his own history of gender identity formation? How does a mother who feels guilty about grieving for her daughter move past this so she that can be there for her son? This study aims to explore these questions and analyze the emotional and intellectual transformative experiences (Mezirow, 1978) a parent undergoes as they reconcile conventional Western beliefs with emerging conceptualizations about gender identity development.

### **Research Questions**

The following three questions were at the heart of this research:

- To what extent have parents experienced transformative learning (Mezirow, 1978), and how did they make the cognitive-affective shift from where they were to where they are today?
- How does a parent's own gender identity development inform their interpretations of the gender transition of the child?
- How does a parent of a gender-expansive child navigate any tensions created within themselves or within their family when their child rejects traditional gendered norms?

### **Overview of Methodology**

To address these research questions, I employed life history research as a methodological framework by using interviewing, journaling, and an autoethnography. Life history research is a narrative research method hailing from the health sciences and anthropology, and it is appropriate for my study, as it “explore[s] a person's micro-historical (individual) experiences within a macro-historical (history of the time) framework” (Hagemaster, 1992). When I worked with parents at PFLAG, I noted that some of their narratives reflected their personal histories with gender identity development: personal

histories enmeshed within a social history that rolled as far back as the day they were born. The autoethnographic approach allowed me to explore my own experience as a parent of a transgender child, to fill in some of the blanks left after the interviews, and to recognize my own position as an insider within this research.

With the permission of two LGBTQ support groups in Calgary, I distributed invitations to participate in this study, stipulating that participants needed to be parents (or step-parents or legal guardians) who had known about their child's gender-expansive identity for at least six months. In a series of interviews and through journal-writing, participants were invited to tell their stories and explore their histories and how these had cultivated their current beliefs and assumptions. Parents were asked to identify experiences that may have led to their own gender identity development, and were also asked to explore common sites of tension within themselves and their families in order to make connections between their own life histories and their children's gender experiences. I also engaged in an autoethnographic study of my own, exploring the same topics but also reflecting on the interview process itself. I then identified common thematic threads between the 16 participants, 9 journals, and my autoethnography by using both qualitative coding (Saldaña, 2013) and descriptive analysis to interpret how the participants constructed meaning at each site of tension. These analyses provided snapshots of the tensions that arose when gender expectations were disrupted in families, and how parents reframed their families through evolving understandings of gender.

### **Rationale and Significance**

Researchers are currently aware of the distress that parents experience when a family member transitions. Research has not, however, documented how parents navigate distress to reach new understandings about gender. By studying the navigational process, this study sheds light on the transformative experiences of parents and their cognitive and affective paths to understanding. While

these insights may have a significant impact on struggling parents, there is more at stake. Parents struggle partly due to the transition itself, but much of their struggle is related to the stigma placed on those who challenge societal norms. It is therefore significant that this study has the potential to be a powerful force in normalizing gender variance in society, reducing the stigma that currently exists and promoting inclusivity.

### **Researcher Standpoint and Assumptions**

First, as noted in the chapter's opening paragraphs, I am a parent of a transgender, genderqueer son. I also have a pansexual daughter, one who is attracted to male, female, and gender-non-conforming people who do not identify as belonging to one gender. I am a Canadian-American white, middle-class female who is bisexual; I have not, however, like my children, "come out" in any shape or form (except here), as my female relationships have been few and private and my public partners have always been male. As a consequence, I have enough experience to understand same-sex attraction but have not myself challenged heteronormativity or cisnormativity personally on a daily basis, as both of my children have done. Having said this, I have challenged it daily in the middle school and high school classroom as an English-language arts teacher. Since my undergraduate work on homophobia in the classroom, I have welcomed LGBTQ2S+ conversations and subject matter within the class and have been intolerant of homophobic or transphobic comments or gestures. I was a guest and advocate at the LGBTQ support group at the last high school where I worked, in Baltimore County, Maryland, and with the facilitator, we sent out an email offering to order safe-space stickers and posters for the faculty. Within a month, GLSEN's (Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education. Network) inverted rainbow-stuffed triangle adorned classroom doors, the library, the nurse's office, and the front, guidance, and special education offices. I cannot imagine what a difference this made to our students who daily challenged gendered social norms either overtly or in their thoughts.

Critical theories have been at the heart of my studies, first as an undergraduate student exploring homophobia in the classroom and then as a master's student challenging race. As an undergraduate student in the education program in Maryland, I became intrigued by my husband's heated reaction to a gay man's flirtation. I had recently left The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS), so my inculcated value of "protecting" the traditional family was now at odds with my view of homosexuality as a natural variation of sexuality. I began attending the university's LGBTQ club and then ultimately wrote my senior paper on combating homophobia in the classroom. For my master's thesis, I underwent a similar experience. I took an eye-opening course on race, class, and gender and became aware of the institutionalized racism from which I benefited. I was teaching at an elite all-girls private school just outside Baltimore, and wondered how I could better the experiences of my African American students there. I undertook a study of 35 alumnae from 1971 through 2004 using Whiteness as Property, a tenet of Critical Race Theory, as my lens. The school ultimately implemented changes based on the recommendations of the paper, and for this reason, I hold the assumption that people can grow and that research can be a powerful tool for change.

From this personal history and research, I have identified some of my own underlying assumptions. My assumption regarding gender identity development is that it takes place due to a combination of factors. I will discuss this more in the literature review, but there is indeed biological evidence that gender is influenced by genetics (Burke et al., 2014; Steensma et al., 2013), most notably supported through studies on twins (Diamond, 2013). There is also compelling evidence that gender identity develops via multiple paths, particularly through socialization (Butler, 2004; Bao & Swaab, 2011; Steensma et al., 2013). Transfamily theorists (McGuire et al., 2016b) have recently made a bold statement urging scholars on both sides of the issue to observe the evidence suggesting that gender

identity develops from multiple factors. Thus, it is my assumption that while gender identity has a genetic component, it is also learned.

Another assumption I hold is that we continue to learn throughout life. My research centers on transformative learning, or the ability to change our perspectives, have a change of heart, or to experience a personal paradigm shift (Mezirow, 2018; West, 2014). Moreover, I assume that the participants in this study participated because they were intrinsically motivated to share their experiences for the betterment of future parents of gender-expansive children. I assume that their narratives reflected how they interpreted the world, but could evolve in their telling based on new information, recent insights, their personal role in the storyline, or their perceived audience. While I did what I could to create a setting where the parents felt comfortable sharing their experiences, I recognize that their narratives were, regardless of what I said, selectively composed for the researcher. Having said this, I found that parents were eager to share their stories, including the messiness of their learning experiences.

Assumptions also exist around the notion of learning and gender in this study. Since 2013, when the American Psychiatric Association (APA) withdrew gender identity disorder from the DSM, professionals in health services have employed an affirmative approach, one that affirms the gender-expansive client rather than one that pathologizes them. I, too, affirm gender-expansive people, and see any personal discomfort they have with their gender as a reflection of living in a society that fails to understand them. I recognize, however, that others may see a gender-expansive person as one who has a mental illness, who has been raised poorly, or who has been socialized incorrectly. It would be easy for me to assume that learning occurs when one recognizes that these ideas are not supported by science and have been rejected by current scholars, and then is exposed to theories more in line with affirmative approaches. Of course, learning may not look like this. Transformative learning is “the process by which



we transform problematic frames of reference . . . to make them more inclusive, discriminating, open, reflective and emotionally able to change” (Mezirow, 2018, p. 116), such that we make thoughtful, discerning decisions about future actions. Therefore, if a parent chooses not to listen to their child during the course of transition, it is safe to say they have also chosen not to learn. However, if they do listen, educate themselves about gender variance, choose to maintain a relationship with the child but without accepting all the decisions the child makes (e.g., they accept the transition from female to male or vice versa, but not when the child presents as gender-queer, both male and female), then it is possible that some transformation has indeed occurred. Transformative learning occurs when one wrestles with old perceptions that need readjustment, reformation, or replacement in order to accommodate new perceptions of oneself or the world. Thus, I will assume that transformative learning in this study is the parent’s ability to see gender in new, more inclusive ways, but not necessarily the ways in which I see.

### **Gender Lexicon**

The research on gender and gender variation is growing rapidly, and the lexicon is evolving with it. For this study, I elected to use the term gender-expansive when addressing all people under the umbrella of transgender and non-binary persons. The current wrestling over terms for accuracy and inclusivity demonstrates the speed with which this field is growing and the necessity to select (or generate) terms that reflect the current understandings of gender, and more importantly, to correct misconstructions about gender. I have employed the term gender-expansive, coined by psychotherapist and former director of The Gender Family Project of the Ackerman Institute for the Family, Jean Malpas (2017), because it includes both transgender and non-binary individuals inclusively: “individuals who broaden their own culture’s commonly held definitions of gender” (Brill & Kenney, 2016, p. 308). The term gender-expansive has been adopted by numerous professionals and support groups due to its

positive connotation, and I selectively employ this term in this writing to reflect the current understandings and perspectives in the research.

### **Definitions of Key Terminology**

For the purpose of this dissertation, the following terms from Stephanie Brill and Lisa Kenney's *The Transgender Teen: A Handbook for Parents and Professionals Supporting Transgender and Non-Binary Teens* (2016) are provided for clarity. The pivotal handbook *The Transgender Child: A Handbook for Families and Professionals* (Brill & Pepper, 2008) was the first pro-transfamily guide for parents and was a harbinger of changes to come in 2013; the adolescent version will be used, however, because it is the most updated.

#### ***Definitions Regarding Gender***

**Sex:** Refers to a person's biological status (male, female, intersex). Indicators of sex include sex chromosomes, gonads, internal reproductive organs and external genitalia (p. 309).

**Sexual orientation:** Part of our identity that is romantically and/or sexually attracted to others. Our sexual orientation and our gender are separate, though related, parts of our overall identity (p. 309).

**Gender:** The complex interrelationship between: the body (our experience of our bodies, as well as how society genders our bodies and interacts with us based on our bodies and perceived sex); identity (internal sense of self as male, female, neither, a blend of both, or something else; who we privately know ourselves to be); and expression (how we present our gender to others, and how society, culture, community and family perceive, interact with, and try to shape our gender). The interaction of these three elements comprises one's gender. Gender roles, expectations, and norms change over time and are different between cultures (p. 308).

**Cisgender:** Refers to people whose gender identity aligns with their assigned sex at birth (cis- from Latin, meaning, “on the same side [as]” or “on this side [of]”, in contrast to “trans”, from the Latin

root meaning “across”, “beyond”, or “on the opposite side [of]” (p. 307).

**Gender binary/binary:** A system that constructs gender according to two discrete and opposite categories—male and female. Binary gender identities include man or woman, girl or boy (p. 307).

**Gender non-binary or non-binary:** An umbrella term for gender identities and expressions that are not exclusively male or female. People who identify their gender as non-binary can feel that they are both male and female, neither male nor female, or something else altogether. Non-binary identities are recognized in many non-Western cultures around the world (p. 308).

**Gender non-conforming:** Gender that doesn't comply with societal, cultural, communal, and/or familial expectations of gender (p. 317).

**Gender diversity:** A term used to describe and call attention to the naturally occurring variety and differences related to gender that exist in our world (p. 319). Also, gender variance.

**Gender dysphoria:** A feeling of disconnection between one's gender and the sex they were assigned at birth (p. 318).

**Gender-expansive:** An umbrella term used for individuals who broaden their own culture's commonly held definitions of gender, including expectations for its expressions, identities, roles, or other perceived gender norms. Gender-expansive individuals may include those with transgender and non-binary gender identities, as well as those whose gender in some way is seen to be stretching society's notions of gender (p. 308).

**Gender expression:** This is our “public” gender. How we present our gender in the world through behavior, clothing, hairstyle, voice, mannerisms, and other forms of presentation, and how society, culture, community, and family perceive, interact with, and try to shape our gender. Expression is also related to gender roles and how society uses them to try to enforce conformity to current gender norms (p. 316).

**Gender identity:** A person's innermost core concept of self which can include male, female, a blend of both, neither, and many more. Gender identity is how individuals perceive themselves and what they call themselves. One's gender identity can be the same or different from their sex assigned at birth. Gender identity can evolve and shift over time (p. 312).

**Transgender:** Often used as umbrella term to describe an individual whose gender identity differs from their assigned sex at birth. Transgender can also be used to refer to people who experience deep feelings of incongruence with their assigned sex [at birth] and associated sex characteristics and feel alignment with what many often think of as the "opposite sex." Being trans or transgender does not imply any specific sexual orientation (p. 309). The terms "transgendered" and transsexual are outdated.

**Two-spirit:** A non-binary gender identity specifically associated with Native American and First Nation cultures (p. 314).

### ***Definitions Regarding the Family***

**Family:** For this paper, Michael Carter's (2014) definition of family—and its diversity—is appropriate: "family here is understood as *any primary group of people who share an obligatory relationship with one another*, rather than the traditional, legal conception which limits the definition to married couples with children" (p. 3).

**Transfamily:** Any family with a gender-expansive member.

**Child(ren):** Due to the small sample size of this study, I did not restrict the ages of the participants' children. Although the word "child" has the connotation of youth, in this study the parents had young, adolescent, and adult children, and I noted the age of a child only when it was relevant.

**Parent:** For the purpose of this paper, a parent includes legal parents, step-parents, or legal guardians of a child.

**West(ern):** A very broad term used when referencing European countries or former colonies that

have been influenced by Greek/Roman culture, Christianity, and the Enlightenment period (Kurth, 2003) and that share many social norms, ethical viewpoints, and belief systems. That is, for this study, I use Western in a cultural sense that includes Europe, Canada, the United States, Australia, New Zealand, and other countries that share a Western worldview.

### ***Definitions Regarding Transformational Learning***

Definitions from this section have been adopted from Illeris's (2018) *Contemporary theories of learning: Learning theorists . . . in their own words*.

**Transformative Learning:** the process by which we transform problematic frames of reference (mindsets, habits of mind, meaning perspectives)—sets of assumptions and expectations—to make them more inclusive, discriminating, open, reflective and emotionally able to change. Such frames are better because they are more likely to generate beliefs and opinions that will prove more true or justified to guide action (Mezirow, 2018, p. 116).

**Biographicity:** [the ability to] redesign again and again, from scratch, the contours of our life within the specific contexts in which we (have to) spend it, and that we experience these contexts as shapeable and designable (Alheit, 2018a, p. 162).

**Holistic Learning:** learning is viewed as more than just the cognitive processing of information. Learning also includes our emotions, body, and spirit (Merriam, 2018, p. 94).

**Disjuncture (Jarvis) or Disorienting Dilemma (Mezirow):** the gap between biography and current experience; human learning begins with disjuncture—with either an overt question or with a sense of unknowing (Jarvis, 2018, p. 16).

**Meaning Perspective/Habits of Mind:** involve how one categorizes experience, beliefs, people, events and oneself. They may involve the structures, rules, criteria, codes, schemata, standards, values,

personality traits and dispositions upon which our thoughts, feelings and action are based (Mezirow, 2018, p. 117).

### **Organization of Dissertation**

Following this introduction, the Literature Review chapter will outline the major research on transfamilies from its earliest days in psychology to the influences of queer and transgender theories, and finally to family theories emerging from sociology. I will then shift to examining transformative theory (Mezirow, 1978) and develop a conceptual framework that provides a structure from which to study parents' learning experiences at the discovery or disclosure of their child's authentic gender identity. In Chapter Three, I review life history and autoethnographic methodologies, and delineate how the research was conducted. In the Findings chapter, I share the three major findings of this study and how they relate to learning and authenticity. In Chapter 5, I return to the research questions and discuss psycho-critical transformation, reframing gender, and queering authenticity. Finally, I discuss how parents' experiences with gender-expansive children inform us about gender, a central tenet of TransFamily theory. I close with some considerations for transformative theory, and then offer suggestions for future research and for practices that support and guide parents of gender-expansive children.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

*“I really believe in the power of representation, of hearing from any marginalized group. You need to hear their voices. You need to see their stories.” (Nadine, interview)*

Research and critical theory on the workings of the transfamily is relatively new. Therefore, this critical literature review will broaden the scope to include theory on gender-expansive individuals in the West. I will begin by providing a brief review of the research on gender-expansive individuals conducted primarily in psychology that reflects the theories of the time periods and the influence of both Queer and Transgender theories. Ultimately these theories splintered into two distinct philosophies regarding gender-expansive care—“reparative therapy” and affirmative approaches. I will then turn to sociology’s discipline of family studies which has focused on the support of the family unit through an affirmation model that validates the gender-expansive child’s embodied experience. The relatively new Transfamily Theory (McGuire et al., 2016b), a theory with an interdisciplinary approach to interrogate gender, is germinating in the field of Family Studies. The researchers cultivating it challenge the gender developmental, social constructivist *and* essentialist theories of gender identity development and call for a re-examination of particular tenets of these psychological and biological theories. Finally, attending to the specific experience of parents, I will show the gaps in the literature regarding their transformative experiences, such as how parents traverse the divide from initial disclosure to personal understanding and resolution. Transformative learning theory offers a vehicle to examine how a parent navigates from a disorienting dilemma (such as the disclosure) through the meaning-making process to emerging with a new understanding of gender. The gaps in the research point toward the need for a deeper understanding of the tensions parents experience and grapple with as they come to know the dynamics of gender and identity.

## **Evolving Philosophies of Gender**

The year 2013 signals a shift for Western professionals with the charge of transgender care. After decades of debate and deliberation, the American Psychiatric Association (APA) revised the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM) and printed the DSM-5 which included vital changes reminiscent of the 1973 change that depathologized homosexuality. Chiefly, the diagnosis of Gender Identity Disorder (GID) was removed and replaced by Gender Dysphoria, a diagnosis that focuses on the distress one feels *socially* with the incongruity of their physical gender and their expressed gender, not transgenderism itself. For parents, this depathologizing decision was significant. Until 2013, parents through the generations were guided by religious officers, psychologists, endocrinologists and medical professionals, and sociologists whose approaches contrasted widely. I provide a brief overview of these evolving views of gender identity below.

## **Gender in Psychology**

German psychologist Magnus Hirschfeld is credited with being the first to distinguish gender variant men from homosexual men in 1910. Noting a distinction among his own patients, he gave males with traditionally feminine tendencies toward behavior and dress the name transvestites (Bauer, 2017), a term that would have likely included all modern day gender-expansive people. Hirschfeld's influence spread to the Pacific coast of the U.S. where Harry Benjamin, who had met Hirschfeld years earlier, developed his life's work in endocrinology and published *The Transsexual Phenomenon* in 1966 (Pfäfflin, 2015). This publication was the first to argue that gender identity was unchangeable; that is, transgender patients could not be taught or re-socialized to become cisgender. Benjamin also medically advised Christine Jorgensen, one of the most famous first transsexual women, when she underwent cross-sex surgery in 1952 (Skidmore, 2011). In honor of Benjamin, the Harry Benjamin International Gender Dysphoria Association was formed in 1979 which was later renamed the World Professional



Association for Transgender Health (WPATH). This history, as seen later in this review, laid the path for family support systems in future generations.

### ***Gender Identity Theories***

It has been long established through the works of the triumvirate developmental psychologists Lawrence Kohlberg, Sandra Bem, and Albert Bandura that gender is learned in stages, through schemas, and by observational learning respectively. It is worth noting that Bem's schema theory recognizes that children develop both masculine and feminine traits to enable them to become more adaptive, with better psychological health (Bem, 1976; Leaper, 2017). In 1987, sociologists Candace West and Greg Zimmerman proposed that "doing gender involves a complex of socially guided perceptual, interactional, and micropolitical activities that cast particular pursuits as expressions of masculine and feminine 'natures'" (p. 126). The more each action becomes habitual, the more masculinity or femininity appears to be a natural state of being, that is to say biologically driven, not socially constructed. Hence, the "'doing' of gender is undertaken by women and men whose competences as members of society is hostage to its production" (p. 126). Feminist Judith Butler frequently expounds on West and Zimmerman's concept of "doing gender," describing the process as a "practice of improvisation within a scene of constraint" (2004, p. 1), and it is within this "scene of constraint" that we are judged on our performance (Wahlig, 2015; West & Zimmerman, 1987).

Gender is how we organize relationships, create meaning, and identify people, and it is an "epistemology for knowing and understanding the operation of culture in defining identities" (Hausman, 2001; Nagoshi & Brzuzy, 2010, p. 432). Through sex-role socialization, children learn to self-regulate their own behavior and censor the behavior of others until they have mastered these behaviors to the point of fluency (West & Zimmerman, 1987). This organizational binary system, nevertheless, is maintained by a system of power (Butler, 2004), a power reinforced through emotional and physical

harm to the offender. Breaking these gender rules “can be a profound threat to the established order, extremely provoking and personally threatening, or unsettling in ways that often seem beyond reason” (Pearlman, 2006, p. 94). Butler (2004) argues that “Norms determine who is human and who is not, which lives are livable, which are not” and this power “demeans the complex ways in which gendered lives are crafted and lived” (p. 4). When one is transgender, when one breaks gender roles or crosses gender boundaries (Nagoshi & Brzuzy, 2010), the “harassment suffered . . . cannot be underestimated” (Butler, 2004, p. 6) and it is because of this that many parents of gender-expansive children seek counseling and support. Their own socialized prejudices, judgments, and fears are often at odds with their parental values, their love of their child, and their need to do what is ultimately best for them.

Transgender theory, a theory that grew out of Queer theory which challenged the heteronormative gender schemas, not only queered (or destabilized) gendered norms but introduced the concept of the fluidity of gender and embodiment (Nagoshi & Brzuzy, 2010). Moreover, not only was gender on a spectrum between traditional femaleness and maleness, but one might feel they are both genders or neither of them (Roen, 2001). Roen (2001) saw transgenderism as *transgressing* the gender binary as opposed to traversing the gender binary. Another contribution of Transgender theory that pushed the boundary of social constructivist conceptions of gender was the idea of self-embodiment, not the essentialist, biological view of the body but the fully embodied person who feels both masculine and feminine, a blending of both, or an absence altogether.

### ***“Reparative” Approaches***

In 1973 when the American Psychiatric Association (APA) removed the diagnosis of homosexuality from the second edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM), there were opposing camps in the fields of psychology and psychiatry. The prevailing camp tended toward a social constructionist approach advocated by gender theorists, while the dissenters

tended to be socially conservative and included the voices of Sandor Rado and Charles Socarides. Rado's Theory of Homosexuality was based primarily on "unproven, but firmly-held assumptions" (Drescher, 2001, p. 12) about sexual patterns that are determined strictly by anatomy. Socarides championed "reparative therapy" well into the 1990s, despite his own son coming out as gay in his 20's and later serving as senior advisor on LGBT rights under President Bill Clinton (Socarides, 2013). Socarides Sr. joined forces with Joseph Nicolosi, who coined the term "reparative therapy," in the 1990s and founded the National Association for Research and Therapy of Homosexuality (NARTH) in 1992 (Zucker, 2003). These practices, although originally aimed at homosexual clients, were used as a framework for treating gender-expansive clients, as well.

So-called reparative or conversion "therapy" was a method employed by mental health professionals to redirect or "repair" their gay clients' "unnatural" inclinations through aversive means (Bright, 2004; Callaghan, 2018). Today, all forms of reparative therapy are considered to be unethical and harmful (Callaghan, 2018) and yet not long ago prominent Toronto psychologist Kenneth Zucker advocated for reparative treatments such as refusing children to wear cross-gender clothing, playing only with same-gender children, removing cross-gender toys or items, and participating in stereotypical activities for one's gender (Zucker, et al., 2012). This was enforced while the child underwent therapy to ascertain the underlying reasons for desiring to be the other gender and the parents were advised to keep stricter gendered boundaries (Zucker, et al., 2012). While these methods do not involve electric shock, emetics, or physical violence, as have been used for adults (Sullivan, 2015), the invisible scars include internalized shame, self-hatred, and fear (Sullivan, 2015). In 2013, the work of many professionals who saw gender non-conformity as a natural human variance, rather than a disorder, came to the forefront and the process of depathologizing gender variances changed the way parents are counseled and supported today. Reparative therapy clinics consequently began shutting their doors and empowered

parent voices arose as advocates for their children in schools, at medical offices, and in courtrooms.

### ***The Dutch Protocol***

The changes of approach to gender-expansive clients and their families came about largely due to an international effort. In the Netherlands, “The Dutch Protocol” (de Vries & Cohen-Kettenis, 2012) at the Center of Expertise on Gender Dysphoria at the VU University Medical Center Amsterdam has become the international standard of care for gender dysphoric youth and was adopted by the World Professional Association for Transgender Health (WPATH). The Dutch approach developed over years of clinical research commencing in 1987 when the first of three Netherlands gender identity clinics was established at Utrecht University Medical Center (Cohen-Kettenis, 2016). An interdisciplinary team developed diagnostic guidelines and protocols for children and adolescents and they began researching the long-term effects of transition on psychological well-being, of feminizing/masculinizing hormones, and of the newly developed hormone suppressants, gonadotropin-releasing hormone (GnR H), commonly known as “puberty blockers” (Spack, 2013). Hormone suppressants had a significant impact on families of adolescent transgender children. Studies show that transgender behavior manifests itself especially at two stages in life—early childhood and puberty (Shumer, et al., 2016). In either case, the power to suspend puberty provides parents and their children time to process the meaning and implications of transition. According to the Dutch Protocol, the main reasons for suppressing puberty would be to 1) provide the family time needed to explore options and the implications for the child and family, 2) lessen the emotional distress and depression transgender youth often experience when secondary sex characteristics appear, and 3) offer youth the opportunity to later begin the hormones of their affirmed gender, without the manifestation of their biological secondary sex characteristics (Shumer et al., 2016; Vrouenraets & de Vries, 2016). In this way, Dutch families, and the families of

those clinics that have adopted the protocol, see their transgender child develop into the man or woman they feel they are inside while imperceptibly “passing” on the outside.

Norman Spack, a pediatric endocrinologist from Boston Children’s Hospital at Harvard Medical School, was one of the first North Americans to witness this affirmative care. He traveled to Holland to examine “12-16-18” (Spack, 2014) for himself. According to Dutch Protocol, when puberty begins, usually around age 12, parent(s) and their child can choose to begin hormone suppression. At 16, after a series of tests and counselling, if needed, teens may begin cross-hormones. At 18, they can elect to have surgery. From some, though limited, on-going long-term studies conducted at the Center of Expertise on Gender Dysphoria, hormone blockers have been found to be safe, and Spack was so impressed with the outcomes at the clinic, the health of the young men and women who had transitioned successfully, that he brought 12-16-18 home to Boston. Spack (2013) wrote:

[Transgender] patients strain our usual constructs about nature and nurture. Yet we also learn, as we did when homosexuality was removed from being listed as a mental illness in 1973, about the negative effects on patients of describing a condition as a mental illness when it appears to be secondary to medical treatment delayed or denied. There is no greater gift to patients than to respect them for who they believe they are and to enable them to refashion their bodies to match their affirmed gender. (p. 483)

When he returned to Boston Children’s Hospital at Harvard Medical School and shared his findings from the Netherlands with his colleagues, they adopted the Dutch Protocol in 2007, the first program of its kind in North America.

### ***The Gender Affirmative Model***

During this time period, affirmative approaches to therapy and medical practice of gender-expansive children and their families gained popularity. Arlene Istar Lev’s 2004 reputable guide for

professionals, *Gender emergence: Therapeutic guidelines for working with gender variant people and their families*, was unapologetically progressive. In her preface she wrote:

The clinical and philosophical ideology outlined in this book is based on a belief that transgenderism is a normal and potentially healthy variation of human expression. The working framework outlined here is that nothing is inherently “mentally ill” within transgendered people but rather they are trying to adapt and cope with an untenable culture. The stigma of mental illness could not be associated with gender transgressions unless proper gender expressions were previously imposed. Since they *are* currently imposed, those who are gender variant experience great pain developing an authentic and stable sense of self. It is suggested that the psychotherapist’s role is to assist the process of an emerging authentic self, even one that stands outside of socially acceptable gender rules. (p. xix)

Lev’s reference to imposed Western gender expressions can be contrasted to various non-Western cultures such as the North American two-spirit or the Samoan fa’afafine. The two-spirit are honored within their culture for their male and female gifts, their spirituality, and unique roles in society. As two-spirit scholar Harlan Prudent notes, the definition of two-spirit, is not based on sexual identity, but on distinctive roles in their communities, namely leaders, intermediaries, or medicine people (Robinson, 2017). Likewise, the fa’afafine and fakaleiti, and many others in the Polynesian Islands, are “men who are not just cross-dressers but often males who have been reared as females . . . Biologically they are men—but psychologically and behaviorally they may be women . . .” (Farran, 2010, p. 14). Moreover, regarding lovers, “It is important to note that fa’afafine are attracted to, and engage in sexual interactions with, masculine males who self-identify as ‘straight men,’ not gay” (Vasey & VanderLaan, 2009, p. 270). Thus, the fa’afafine are not seen as men by other Polynesians either, but as a third gender.

Significantly, unlike many gender-expansive youth in the West, it does not appear that fa’afafine

experience gender dysphoria; their societies are accepting of their gender variance (Farran, 2010). Like the two-spirit, these individuals are accepted within their families, have a valued role within their community, and are symbolic of their society's acquiescence of gender variation. Thus it is that culture determines what is "normal" and what is "intolerable." The fact that gender variance is honored within many Indigenous cultures attests that Western views of gender are arbitrary. Lev and other like-minded clinicians pioneered the way for a massive paradigm shift regarding treatment protocols for gender-expansive patients, clients, students, employees, and citizens (Hill, et al., 2010, p. 11). In an article that broached the growing controversy over transgender health, the authors questioned Western culture itself:

... what do we know about how to promote adaptive mental health outcomes among these children and families? If we look at these children not as "at risk" for later sexual and gender minority identities but rather 'at risk' for social oppressions and stressors, what do we know about their resilience? (Gray, et al., 2012, p. 5).

Rather than turning the microscope on the gender-variant child, these researchers turned it on to society to ascertain Western culture's culpability in harming the mental health of gender variant children. Studies at the time, including Hill, et al.'s (2013) below, were just beginning to demonstrate that children's resilience is born out of the support systems around them.

The gender affirmative model is an interdisciplinary approach to treating gender-variant clients and was developed by clinical psychologists, endocrinologists, and medical doctors from Northwestern University, Chicago; University of California, San Francisco; Harvard Medical School, Boston; and University of Southern California, Los Angeles. These practitioners (Hidalgo, et al., 2013) spearheaded a new clinical approach based on what Spack had witnessed in the Netherlands, the anthropological narratives of third gender persons in other cultures, and their own experiences working with gender-variant people of all ages. The model establishes five premises which were quite bold for 2013, the year

of the article's publication and the year transgenderism was removed from the DSM-IV. These premises are 1) gender variation is not a disorder; 2) gender presentation is diverse and varies by culture; 3) the current research shows that gender is a mix of biology, socialization (and development), and culture (context); 4) gender may be fluid, not binary; and 5) when there is a case that includes pathology, it is often the case that cultural reactions are at the root of it, not gender variation. These premises challenged the contemporary approaches to gender therapy by turning the philosophical lens from gender variation itself to Western culture's impact on how gender is molded, manicured, and, at times, cruelly maintained. Moreover, their model defines gender health as "a child's opportunity to live in the gender that feels most real or comfortable to that child and to express that gender with freedom from restriction, aspersions, or rejection" (Hidalgo et al., 2013, p. 286). Thus, a child's gender health is highly dependent upon their caretaker's ability to provide an environment with these freedoms.

For many parents to be that support system within the affirmative model, they often need to transition alongside their child (Malpas, 2017), transforming their own traditional views of gendered behavior and becoming experts on gender and advocates for their child (Lev, 2004). Parents often feel responsible, guilt, isolation, shame, and secondary stigma, that is, the stigma directed at the family of a gender variant child (Dierckx, et al., 2015; Johnson & Benson, 2014). Fathers, studies have shown, take longer to accept gender role exploration and transition (Kuvallanka, et al., 2014). They are more likely to hold to traditional narratives and social constructions for gender (McLean, et al., 2017) and feel a need to protect their family (Kuvallanka et al., 2014). Considering that gender roles for men have been more rigid traditionally, risking a variety of abuse should they drop the "mask of masculinity," it follows that they would cling to their paternal role of protecting the family while also "protecting" the gender roles of their children. Parents play an active role in the gender identity development of their children (Malpas, 2011), as children are actively gender labeling by age 3½, comprehending its stability by 4½,



and its constancy by six (Kohlberg & DeVries, 1987; MacNish, 2015). Ultimately, parents who prove to be the most supportive of their child's journey with gender are those who are able to separate their own transitional needs from their child's (Coolhart & Shipman, 2017).

The shift of approach in gender-expansive care not only proved to have positive health and well-being results for gender-expansive children (Brill & Kenney, 2016; Lev, 2004), but their parents, too, were more empowered when supporting their child's exploration of gender (Coolhart & Shipman, 2017; Dierckx et al., 2015; Malpas, 2017; McGuire, et al., 2016a). Parents were better able to "resolve their own shame or discomfort" (Hill et al., 2010, p. 11) with gender variance, and as their confidence and knowledge grew, their social networks strengthened, as well. City University of New York psychologists Darryl Hill, Kristen Sica, Alisa Johnson, and Dr. Edgardo Menvielle of Children's National Medical Center, DC replicated a study conducted on parents of gender-expansive children by Dr. Zucker and colleagues in Toronto and Dr. Peggy Cohen-Kettenis of Amsterdam (Hill et al., 2010). Despite some limitations of the study, the results suggested that the gender-expansive children of parents who affirmed and supported their gender exploration showed fewer signs of pathology and increased adjustment. Not surprisingly, this study fomented debate within the psychological and medical communities—"reparative" counsellors on one side, affirmative counsellors on the other—but by 2013 the debate, at the medical level, was over. Culturally, however, lay people were still at odds.

### ***The 2013 APA Decision and Its Implications***

When the APA published the DSM-5 without the GID diagnosis, it signaled a new era, one where transgender people could no longer be medically or legally deemed pathological. Instead, the focus shifted to society and its obsession with gender conformity. Butler (1990/2007) argued that our gender "performances" create the illusion of a gender binary when gender itself is not necessary at all. In *Gender Trouble* (1990/2007), she built the argument that "*gender* is not a noun, but neither is it a set of

free-floating attributes, for we have seen that the substantive effect of gender is performatively produced and compelled by the regulatory practices of gender coherence” (p. 34). Gender, she continued, is a verb, a performance or a series of meticulous movements which claim to define us. With regard to gender transitioning, the transgender child is learning to perform as another gender. Or, as we are now seeing youth emerge as gender fluid, genderqueer, androgynous, bigender, and agender or gender-neutral, gender performance is blurred between the two dichotomies. Today, more youth and young adults are choosing not to transition fully but to live life authentically, disregarding both pink and blue (Cohen-Kettenis, 2016).

A surprising study attesting to this trend had participants identify their own gender, using their own choice of terms. For the 8% who did not identify themselves as transgender, male, or female, most over the age of 32 identified themselves as cross-dressers, while those under age 32 self-identified in non-binary terms such as genderqueer (Meadow, 2016). It is significant that as society becomes more accepting of gender diversity, the language evolves to reflect this acceptance. Moreover, even while insurance companies are increasingly covering the costs of sex change surgeries, fewer patients are electing to have surgery, either delaying it or choosing to live authentically in a non-binary status (Cohen-Kettenis, 2016). In 2014, the Human Rights Campaign launched an online video series, *Debunking the myths: Transgender health & well-being*, and their first myth addressed the notion that “surgery is a top priority for all transgender people” (Human Rights Campaign, 2014). While surgery is essential for the personal confirmation of some, for many others it is not. Although the stigma of being transgender did not disappear in 2013, the psychological health of transgender and non-binary people has certainly improved since they gained some legal ownership over their gender performance.

## **Sociology's Family Theories and Concepts**

### ***Family Stress and Resilience***

The focus of my doctoral research is the experiences and perceptions of parents of transgender and non-binary children. Research aimed at parents of gender-expansive children and the resilience of the family unit does not gain full attention until post-2013 when the finger of blame was no longer pointed at them. Largely attributed to queer theory and its defiance of dichotomies and constricting definitions, the language for the transgender community also evolved. Today there is vocabulary for gender-expansive identity and issues, advanced medical and surgical technology, and insurance companies consent to cover the costs, partially or in full (Pearlman, 2006). Yet despite these advances, parents are often caught between generations—aware of the changing culture yet rooted by their own gender identity education. Stanford Sociologist Cecilia Ridgeway observed that when people are in new situations, they often rely on stereotypes to guide them, and because people rely on what they “think” others believe, which are generally stereotypes, they change their own behaviors slower than they would had they been left to think for themselves (Ryan, 2016, p. 4). Subsequently, old cultural beliefs get reissued and reinforced. Because gender operates as a background identity, old ways get “rewritten into new practices even when the explicit goal is to change them” (Ryan, 2016, p. 3). It is usually through family counseling and therapy that parents with needs, such as cognitive dissonance or emotional distress, come to rebalance a family that has become de-centered.

### ***Family Counseling Affirmative Approaches***

Families are central to the development of identity in society, forming the basis of values and world view (Shema, 2016). They “serve as a gateway through which children are introduced to the dominant social norms” (Larrabee & Kim, 2010, p. 351). It is no wonder, then, that psychologists originally accused parents for promoting gender non-conforming behavior. Yet, by shifting the lens and

recognizing parents not as the perpetrator of gender non-conformity but as a potential support system for a child who demonstrates gender diversity, families are better able to cope with the stress of defying social conventions (Malpas, 2011). Parents embark on a journey, a transformative one for many, that challenges their notions of what is “normal.” It is also fair to say that parents will seek out support that coincides with their own standpoint (Gray et al., 2016), trying to balance the need to align their worldview with the needs of their child.

Family resilience is defined as the “the processes by which families are able to adapt and function competently following exposure to significant adversity or crises” (Patterson, 2002, p. 352). The Family Adjustment and Adaptation Response (FAAR) Model reveals that each family differs in their capacity to handle life’s demands based on how they gauge the weight of their demands against their ability to handle them, how they see themselves as a family unit, and how they see themselves in society (Patterson, 2002). When there is family disjuncture, such as in the case of a gender-expansive disclosure or discovery within some families, family members need time to re-examine gender, its implications on the family, and the powerful need to appease the status quo. Transformative theorist Peter Jarvis describes this disjuncture as “a gap between what we know and the experience that we are having, which we cannot explain . . . when our biographical experience is insufficient to deal with our present experience” (Jarvis, 2008, p. 555). In the case of parents, their lack of personal experience with gender identity development may indeed have not prepared them for their child’s experience. Family therapist, Joan Patterson (2002) writes, “In the aftermath of a major adversity, the family's world view may be changed as they reflect on the losses they have experienced. When a world view is shattered by a non-normative experience like the death of a child, the family's ability to heal, grow, and move forward often involves reconstructing a new view of the world that allows them to make sense of such an event”

(p. 358). Making meaning of gender variances, what it means for the parent, and the implications for the family are at the heart of a parent's transformative journey.

A number of approaches exist to aid family therapists in guiding transfamilies through this stressful period. At times, it is the parent who is in need of therapy more than the child. Coolhart and Shipman's (2017) article, "Working toward family attunement: Family therapy with transgender and gender-nonconforming children and adolescents," emphasizes the necessity to ensure the child's safety first. Negative messages not only come from the outside world, but "family members may be in distress and expressing views, thoughts, and feelings that are hurtful to the child" (p. 115). When this is the case, the authors, both licensed family therapists, initiate family sessions with the child and family members separately. This process normalizes the experience for parents, provides them a safe environment to interrogate gender, allows them a private place to express strong emotions such as anger, grief, fear, or shame, and it helps them build the capacity for resilience. Once a parent's feelings and worries are affirmed and normalized, they then can explore their own understandings of gender and how these understandings were "informed by culture, race/ethnicity, religion, and class" (Coolhart & Shipman, 2017, p. 118). Likewise, Jean Malpas's (2011) Multi-Dimensional Family Approach also considers the gender identity education of the parents themselves. He writes, "Mapping the gender traditions and flexibility of both parents, their families and cultures of origin through a genogram clarifies the potential points of conflict and alliances between parents and with significant family members around the child" (p. 457). With this knowledge, family members can consider how these cultural beliefs can be harmful to the gender-expansive family member, and they are provided education on gender variance and diversity in nature. Once tension has dissipated, the therapist aids the family in working toward attunement by having sessions as a family unit to develop strategies of resilience.

Jeni L Wahlig (2015) counsels family members who experience "dual" ambiguous loss.

Ambiguous loss (Boss, 1999) is the ambiguity created when there is unresolved loss, such as when a parent goes missing during wartime. Early clinical research reported by Emerson (1996) and Ellis and Ericksen (2002) likened family member accounts to Kübler-Ross and Kessler's (2005) Stages of Death and Dying, experiencing denial, anger, negotiation, and depression before finally accepting what was and was not lost. Wahlig (2015) argues that family members of transgender children experience "dual ambiguous loss" as the child may be physically present, but there is ambiguity about whether they will be the same person after transition. On the other hand, psychologically parents may recognize their child, but physically they are altering. In both regards, their natal child may seem "dead" or gone. Coolhart et al.'s (2018) recent study on ambiguous loss indicates that while all parents in their study on parents of male transgender children experienced ambiguous loss, they did not necessarily experience grief. Rather, they felt the loss of gendered dreams or rites of passage for their child. McGuire et al. (2016a) recognize that this is a time for revising attachments as family members adjust to changes with one another. They argue that "families vary with regard to gendered expectations placed on different members. Gender expectations [or gender roles] may influence a family's sense of loss when family members transition their gender" (McGuire et al., 2016a, p. 381). Adjusting relationships, shifting identities, and "redefining the self" (p. 381) are typical steps in family adjustment and recovering from loss.

In Krysti Ryan's study (2016), however, we see a new parent emerging in the literature. Gender-expansive parents, as Ryan coined them, are led by the child, expanding their understanding of gender identity for the sake of their child. They are well-meaning parents, they evolve and grow, and they make gendered mistakes. Gender-subversive parents, on the other hand, are the minority. They are those parents who have had prior experience with LGBT people and issues through their education or career and they fearlessly "disrupt dominant gender schemas" (Ryan, 2016, p. 3) with their child. These parents

are motivated not only by their child's welfare but by their "work to undermine hegemonic gender in their parenting . . . because they have an ideological commitment to resisting the restrictive forces of the gender binary that preceded their parenting experiences" (Ryan, 2016, p. 5). With more education and positive exposure in the West, it is possible that the numbers of subversive parents will grow.

### ***Transfamily Theory***

Transfamily theory (McGuire et al., 2016b) is in its early stages of development, but the researchers are applying an interdisciplinary approach to interrogate gender. The following sections indicate points of tension experienced by many families when they first learn a family member is gender-expansive. These points of tension not only highlight challenges but inform us about how gender is developed, navigated, and negotiated within the family. The titles highlighting gender, sexuality, and family are adopted from Oswald et al.'s (2005) analysis of "queering" the family. The verb queering as used by Oswald et al., referred to the "acts and ideas that resist heteronormativity" (p. 6); for the purpose of this overview, queering refers to the acts and ideas challenging the status quo regarding gender. The section below focusing on "queering" identity emerges from the work of communications researcher, Kristen Norwood (2010).

***Point of tension: Gender.*** Traditionally, gender has been conceived as a dichotomous relationship, and yet more people have come to understand gender as falling along a spectrum with gender-expansive individuals filling the gap. The notion of questioning the male-female binary is queering gender. Gender-subversive parents who understood the concept of gender variance prior to having a gender-expansive child are often involved in "complex gendering" because of their ability to "resist or subvert stereotyping" and to challenge the gender binaries (Oswald et al., 2005). Gender queer, gender fluid, bi-gender, non-gender, or non-binary queer gender interminably because they do not "transition" from one gender to another and then blend into society (Wahlig, 2015). Parents of these

children often live in a state of gender disruption as their children reject “cultural ideas of masculinity and femininity” (McGuire et al., 2016b, p. 62). For the most part, parents who accept their child have learned to tolerate the decentering of gender by challenging the status quo.

***Point of tension: Sexuality.*** It is not uncommon for gender-expansive children to experience sexual variations, as well. Gender and sexuality are often intertwined (McGuire et al., 2016b; Nagoshi & Brzuzy, 2010; Oswald et al., 2005; Pearlman, 2006) and are two intersecting identities of gender-expansive people (Nagoshi & Brzuzy, 2010). The use of hormones also influences the sex drive and ostensibly the sexual orientation of a gender-expansive individual taking them (McGuire et al., 2016b). A child who was once heterosexual may later report being gay, lesbian, bisexual or pansexual, potentially decentering sexuality in a family who only recognizes heterosexual relationships—whether transgender or not. That is to say, a family may support their transgender child through transition with the hope that once transitioned, he or she will live a “normal” life. Hence, in addition to gender being decentered, sexuality often disrupts heteronormativity and poses a further challenge for parents and family members struggling with transition.

***Point of tension: Identity.*** In Norwood’s extensive dissertation, “Here and gone: Competing discourses in the communication of families with a transgender member” (2010), she scrutinized the discourse of family members concerning identity and transition. She writes, “When one engages in such a fundamental change of expressed identity, the person’s relational partners are faced with renegotiating who that person is as well as who that person is to them, as a relational partner” (2010, p. viii). When gender-expansive people transition, they often alter more than their appearance (Lev, 2004); they change their identity, their familial roles, the nature of relationships (Norwood, 2012) and their gendered social position in the world (Wahlig, 2015). Family members often feel deceived, wondering if they ever knew their family member at all (Pearlman, 2006). One client who felt betrayed confided, “I felt so bogus like



it was all a lie. I was duped, mistaken. Didn't really know my own child. I felt so close to her. How could I not know such an intimate, important thing?" (Pearlman, 2006, p. 111). Malpas (2017) shares an anecdote of when a parent failed to recognize his child's identity and saw her as "the other":

When Tom discovered that his son identified as a girl all of a sudden his new daughter was completely foreign to him, he had no idea how to relate to her outside of their father-son connection but when a kid is too different their parents can experience them as the other and lose empathy for them.

It becomes the job of the therapist to offer guidance or support to bridge the divide between the two identities—as it may seem to the parent—until they are aligned. That is, as the gender-expansive child comes into their authentic self, their family members must also reacquaint themselves with a loved one who is the same, but different.

***Point of tension: Family.*** Finally, research bears witness to the disruptions within the traditional family itself when a child transitions. The family, which exists not only physically, but psychologically as well, needs to make meaning of this transition, and the meaning it makes will determine whether the family pulls together or pulls apart (Wahlig, 2015). This experience may "challenge gender conventions and push family members to stretch and expand, to *queer* (Oswald et al., 2005, p. 146) their thinking in regard to gender, sexuality, and family" (McGuire et al., 2016b, p. 61). Each member is affected to varying degrees as the gender-expansive child may seem the same, and yet they are different, a living coexistence of male and female traits (Norwood, 2013). Often cisnormative privileges and roles change, disrupting the familial power dynamics (McGuire et al., 2016b) and for some family members, this can be a deal-breaker for the family (Norwood, 2012). Boundary ambiguity (Boss, 1999), "the sense that someone is still a part of the family—in or out, here or gone" (Allen, 2007) may be tenuous as each family member attempts to queer the traditional family unit. Indeed, the boundaries are not wide enough

to allow for such disruption in some families and 25-40% of homeless teens are LGBTQ2S+, a grossly disproportionate number (Homeless Hub, 2017; Coolhart & Brown, 2017; Wahlig, 2015). The greater the boundary ambiguity within a family, the greater the stress on all members as they each accommodate new identities, resolve the conflict of past and future selves, untangle what the change means for them, and grasp how gender identity is formed (Wahlig, 2015).

Studies show that those who feel that gender is determined by, or partially determined by, biological causes or a naturally expressed variation are more apt to accept gender-expansive family members, whereas those who feel it is the gender-expansive person's choice frequently feel it is selfish and immoral (Norwood, 2013). While some quantitative studies suggest there is a biological element to gender (Garcia-Falgueras & Swaab, 2008; Olson-Kennedy et al., 2016; Nguyen, 2019), there is currently not enough evidence to prove that either biological elements or social construction is chiefly responsible for gender (Butler, 2004). Without a verdict, families are left to make meaning for themselves, to make or prevent room for identity, role, and relationship changes (Norwood, 2013), and to decenter cisnormativity and, if needed, heteronormativity, as well.

The research and theory on transgender individuals and transfamilies is largely isolated in the silos of psychology, sociology (family studies), neuroscience, and queer or transgender studies. McGuire et al.'s remarkable work crosses these discipline borders to explore gender construction and family relationships and they have isolated five challenges to these fields, the first two of which I have combined. They challenge 1) the traditionally essentialist idea that sex and gender are binaries, 2) the feminist presumption that gender is constructed socially, 3) developmental theories that assert gender identity develops only in early childhood, and 4) family processes that challenge or accommodate gender-expansive identities. This theory boldly challenges scholars to look beyond their own specialties and accompanying preconceptions to research gender and its diversity. By addressing the challenges

evoked by transfamily theory, researchers could potentially better understand gender-expansive identity development and how a family can best support gender-expansive members.

**Challenge 1: Sex and gender spectrums.** Although people who are intersex are not transgender, neuroscience research shows that intersex conditions demonstrate that sex variations of humans exist between traditional XX and XY. The Intersex Society of North America states that “Intersex is a socially constructed category that reflects real biological variation” (“What is intersex?” 2008) and, like transgender people, the goal of many intersex people is to live their lives without “stigma or trauma” (“What is intersex?” 2008). McGuire and her colleagues (2016b) argue that “the existence of physical sex complexity beyond the binary provides a foundation for examining the variance in development among people whose assigned sex is inconsistent with their self-identified gender” (p. 62). Gender, too, is nonbinary in nature. The long history of transgender people, and the more recent evidence of gender fluid personalities and healthy transitions, suggests that gender falls along a spectrum. A family member’s belief that sex and/or gender are binary or nonbinary in nature will directly affect their ability to support their gender-expansive family member.

**Challenge 2: Nature and nurture.** Though some evidence for a biological contribution to gender identity does exist (Eagly & Wood, 2012; Burke, et al., 2014; Steensma, et al., 2013), it appears that multiple paths lead to one’s gender identity (Bao & Swaab, 2011; Butler, 2004; Steensma et al., 2013). A family member’s understanding of whether their gender-expansive loved one cultivated their gender identity through biology, social construction, neurology (as in the theory that hormones bathe the brain in utero), or a combination of these will influence their interpretation of gender-expansive experience. For instance, studies show that family members who believe the person was “born that way” through biology, will have an easier time accepting the person and will often empathize with their situation.

Conversely, those who suspect their gender-expansive family member chose to be gender variant often feel they have made “a selfish, and even sinful, choice” (Norwood, 2013, p. 165).

**Challenge 3: Gender evolution.** According to Kohlberg’s second stage of Cognitive Developmental Theory of Gender (Kohlberg & DeVries, 1987), Gender Stability develops around the age four. In this stage, children learn that gender remains constant over a lifetime, and yet recent research indicates that this is not entirely true. For some, gender can vary through life and transgender boys often experience an intensification of gender dysphoria at the onset of puberty (Bockting, 2014). McGuire et al. (2016b) assert that “It is becoming increasingly evident, however, that there are multiple pathways and timelines in the development of gender, with some reporting onset of gender variance in adolescence, adulthood, or later adulthood (p. 65). With increasing understanding of gender variability, family members will be better positioned to accept loved ones who demonstrate gender variant behavior, yet until this work is better understood this area remains a point of contention.

**Challenge 4: Family meaning.** McGuire et al.’s (2016b) final challenge is simply that families are complex, and it is the evolving meanings they make that will determine whether they accept, tolerate, reject or embrace their gender-expansive family member. Ultimately, the authors conclude with the following plea: “This article has pulled from both essentialist and social constructivist perspectives to articulate the need for a queer theoretical framework that accounts for the complexities inherent in the intersection of gender, sexuality, and family” (p. 70). While my doctoral thesis cannot completely fill this gap in the literature, it will shed light on some of the aspects of cultivating family meaning.

As suggested in Challenge 4, above, families are complex and family dynamics and meanings evolve. Often when one family member makes a transition of gender, the other family members experience their own personal transitions. From the literature, parents’ stories of their gender-expansive children reveal their tensions, their struggles, and their triumphs. Many express that their journey was

nothing less than transformational experiencing, as adult educational researchers Cranton and Taylor (2012) define it, a “deep shift in perspective, leading to more open, more permeable, and better-justified meaning perspectives” (p. 3). Having been confronted with various theories of gender variation, many of which have not been veritably proven, and then given differing advice on how to proceed, every parent chooses what they feel is best for their child, often after hours of heartfelt, thoughtful deliberation. It is this latter portion that is missing in the research. How does one work through their “disorienting dilemma” (Mezirow, 1978)? That is, how does a parent navigate the journey from disclosure, and all the emotions it often evokes, to empathy and compassion? What cognitive and emotional processes must one traverse to reach a new understanding of gender and embrace a “new” child? Mezirow (1990), who developed transformative learning theory, describes the disorienting dilemma as follows:

. . . perspective transformation occurs in response to an externally imposed disorienting dilemma - a divorce, death of a loved one, change in job status, retirement, or other. The disorienting dilemma may be evoked by an eye-opening discussion, book, poem, or painting or by one’s efforts to understand a different culture that challenges one’s presuppositions. Anomalies and dilemmas of which old ways of knowing cannot make sense become catalysts or ‘trigger events’ that precipitate critical reflection and transformations. Changing social norms can make it much easier to encounter, entertain, and sustain changes in alternative perspectives. (p. 9)

Changing social norms have indeed made it easier for families to shift toward affirmative approaches of therapy, when needed. Yet still, gender operates as a background identity and it is easy for old ways to get "rewritten into new practices even when the explicit goal is to change them" (Ridgeway, 2011). Many family members struggle to reconcile traditional social norms of what it means to be male and female with newer perspectives of gender.

## **Transformative Learning Theory**

To better understand the meaning-making experience of parents as they reconcile what they know of gender, what they are learning about gender, and the implications of gender transition for the future, I turn to transformative learning theory. This theory, developed by sociologist Jack Mezirow, employs such terms as meaning schemas (beliefs, values, and judgements), meaning perspectives (the way one perceives and organizes the world), a disorienting dilemma (a life event that challenges one's meaning perspectives and can trigger transformative learning), and perspective transformation (the process of adapting faulty meaning perspectives to a new world view). My research was framed by a psycho-critical strand of transformative learning theory (Taylor 1998) as many of the participants faced issues of gender from a traditionally Western world view and their gender frames of reference, therefore, were challenged. Transformative learning critical scholars look especially to the work of Jurgen Habermas, the youngest of the Frankfurt School theorists, for critical theory robust enough to examine the role of culture, ideology, bureaucracy and technology in shaping social life (Lange, 2013). According to Habermas's three central learning domains, it is only the third, critical or emancipatory reflection, which has the ability to transform perspective (Mezirow, 1981). Lange (2013) explains that adjustments to instrumental (technical knowledge) and practical (interpersonal/communicative knowledge) requires only accommodations within the meaning scheme, not the meaning perspective. She asserts that it is only "critical reflection on habitual ways of knowing and assumptions within one's world view that is transformative" (Lange, 2013, p. 109). Transformative learning is the process of examining one's meaning perspectives, questioning the uncritically assimilated beliefs, values, and perspectives, and then recognizing how those meaning structures both direct and restrict one's life (Lange, 2013). My critical research falls in line with psycho-critical transformative learning theory because it explores the sociocultural constructed gender identity of parents, how their gender

perspectives are challenged during transition and what this means to them, and the parents' often emotional process of reorganizing their meaning perspectives.

The following section will begin with the affective-social-cognitive dynamic that underlies all learning and relearning in light of new information that contradicts existing meaning perspectives or how one understands the world. Then I will turn specifically to gender identity and role socialization. A final section on the barriers to learning will provide context to why some choose not to entertain new ways of thinking or are unable to do so.

### ***Holistic Learning: Cognitive, Affective, and Social Domains***

Scholars such as John Dirkx, Peter Jarvis, and Edward Taylor challenged Mezirow's work, contending that he failed to give equal weight to the role emotions, affect, or intuition play in learning and relied too heavily upon cognition in the learning process (Dirkx, 2001; Illeris, 2014; Jarvis, 2006; Maiese, 2017; Taylor, 2001). Other scholars, such as Knud Illeris and Etienne Wenger, proposed that learning included both the cognitive and affective domains, but also the social sphere, and that we learn through interacting with others and using our senses to interpret the world (Illeris, 2018). For this study, I will assume all three domains—cognitive, affective, and social—are at work.

Through the extensive work of Mezirow and Peter Jarvis, many of the cognitive aspects of learning have been mapped out in complex diagrams that indicate that no two individuals or situations are alike. Learning can be as simple as memorization through repetition or as complicated as reformulating meaning perspectives through reflection, reasoning, evaluation of prior experiences, experimentation, discussion, and practicing new roles (Illeris, 2018). According to Jarvis's (2006) work on a comprehensive theory of human learning, we experience disjuncture when one's harmonious state of life is disrupted by an experience or episode that does not align with one's prior knowledge and "our biographical repertoire is no longer sufficient to cope automatically with our situation, so that our

unthinking harmony with our world is disturbed and we feel unease” (p. 16). Because emotions are connected to our meaning perspectives, this disjuncture can feel extremely disorientating, personal, and painful, and it often threatens one’s sense of identity (Jarvis, 2006; Maiese, 2017). During my time with PFLAG, I certainly witnessed many parents whose journey included “working through their emotions” in order to think clearly. Their cognitive-affective struggle was evident in their worries about what this transition meant for their child’s identity (are they the same person?), their gendered relationship (will my mother-daughter relationship end?), their future (will I never be a grandparent?), and whether their relationship would recover.

Michelle Maiese (2011), a philosopher whose work concentrates on the interplay of emotion, cognition and embodiment, insists that the affective domain works with the cognitive domain to interpret our changing environment and our place within it. She (2017) argues:

Affective reactions to stimuli typically are the very first cognitive reactions that subjects have, and they go on to inform and shape ‘higher-level’ cognitive acts of perceptions, thought, and judgment. If the cognitive processes did not involve an underlying process of affective framing, then agents in the world would be faced with a potentially endless array of possible cognitive and interpretive options, and presumably would shut down from information overload. (p. 206)

“Working through emotions,” then, would be the re-examining, recalibrating, or reworking of these affective frames. This is particularly true when our arising thoughts and feelings are seemingly contradictory. Clark and Dirkx (2000) suggest that our consciousness is narrated by the voices from our past and the voices from our present, each one offering a different standpoint and logical reality. Indeed, when supporting a transgender child through transition, one hears the opinions of a multitude of voices, and yet the experience “often reveals our multiplistic, contradictory self” (Dirkx, 2001, p. 65; Taylor & Cranton, 2013). These personal contradictory selves often reveal the many conflicting messages we have



managed to tolerate until this particular conflict.

While intense, seemingly conflicting emotions have the ability to stall cognition, they also have the power to stimulate cognition, whether to eliminate distress or to gain clarity (Dirkx, 2008).

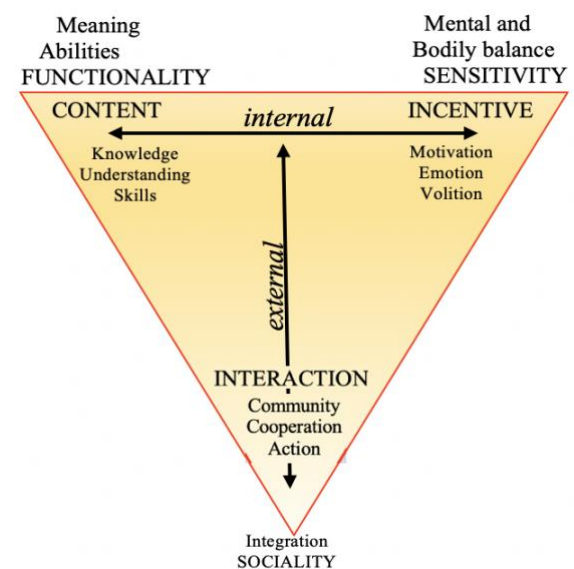
“Conversely, it is feelings that are often the trigger for reflective exploration, and by exploring one’s feelings, greater self-awareness and change in meaning structures occur” (Taylor, 2001, p. 225). For

parents of gender-expansive children, this exploration involves educating oneself about gender transition, gender issues in society, education, and the law, and one’s personal conception with gender and gender variation. At this point, “a subject’s new ‘openness’ and attunement to certain features in their surroundings involves a shift that is simultaneously both cognitive and affective” (Maiese, 2017, p. 200). A parent’s new cognitive-affective orientation brings transformation of habits of mind (Maiese, 2017), a “set of assumptions—broad, generalized, orienting predispositions that act as a filter for interpreting the meaning of experience” (Mezirow, 2000, p. 17). Transformational learning, then, is a cognitive-affective journey, yoked together with experience.

To understand the social domain as it works with the cognitive and affective domains, I drew upon the work of Knud Illeris and Etienne Wenger. Illeris’s inverted triangle model demonstrates his holistic conceptualization of learning (see Figure 1). The vertical double arrow

**Figure 1**

*The Three Dimensions of Learning*



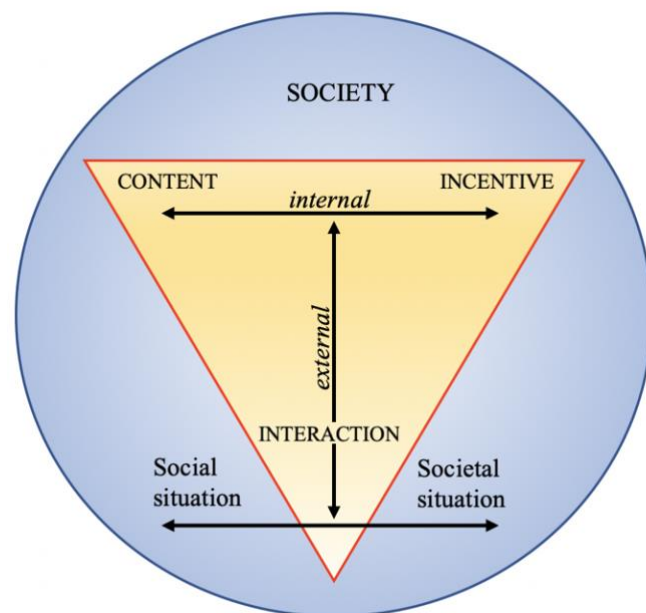
*Note.* Adapted from *How we Learn: Learning and non-learning in school and beyond* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed., p. 27), by K. Illeris, 2017. Routledge. Copyright 2017 by Knud Illeris.

signifies the external interactions one has with others, culture, and the environment, while the horizontal double arrow symbolizes the internal or psychological process of learning, a process that often involves interpreting the social interaction domain (Illeris, 2018). Note that the three domains work together throughout the learning process and are not isolated although each may be prominent at differing points within the process. Illeris (2018) explains that the social domain (see Figure 2) “serves the personal integration in communities and society and thereby also builds up the sociality of the learner. However, this building up necessarily takes place through the two other dimensions” (p. 5). In Wenger’s *Communities of practice: Learning, meaning, and identity* (1998), he establishes that we are social beings first and foremost. To gain competence, learning often involves engagement with others and we generate meaning from these experiences. Furthermore, he comments on the social learning nature of the family:

Families struggle to establish a habitable way of life. They develop their own practices, routines, rituals, artifacts, symbols, conventions, stories, and histories. Family members hate each other and they love each other; they agree and they disagree. They do what it takes to keep going. Even when families fall

**Figure 2**

*The Social and Societal Dimensions of Holistic Learning*



*Note.* Adapted from *How we Learn: Learning and non-learning in school and beyond* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed., p. 93), by K. Illeris, 2017. Routledge. Copyright 2017 by Knud Illeris.

apart, members create ways of dealing with each other. Surviving together is an important enterprise, whether surviving consists of the search for food and shelter or of the quest for a viable identity. (Wenger, 1998, p. 6)

When a parent has learned their child is gender-expansive, it is often a learning experience for all family members, involving the cognitive and affective domains that respond to social interactions within the environment.

### ***Gender Role Socialization and Identity Formation***

From Mezirow's studies, he determined that people use life experiences to form meaning schemes—beliefs, values, and ideologies—which together form meaning perspectives that allow one to interpret and make meaning in the world (Taylor & Cranton, 2013). Much of our sociocultural experience “may be unarticulated but [it] still shapes the meaning of perspectives” (Taylor & Cranton, 2013, p. 37). One of these meaning perspectives is gender and how we learn to “do gender” (West & Zimmerman, 1987) correctly for one's culture. Fisk and Ridgeway (2018) contend that these meaning perspectives or, as they call them, gender frames play in the background of all social interactions and resisting gender norms ultimately results in social sanctions, isolation, or punishment (Fisk & Ridgeway, 2018; Eagly & Wood, 2012). Eagly and Wood (2012) argue that people reproduce these gender roles and “to varying extents, [they] internalize gender roles as personal gender identities” (p. 463). We see this especially with the roles of mothers and fathers, sons and daughters, and the distress it can cause when children transition and they “lose” their “son” or “daughter.” Fisk and Ridgeway (2018) argue that these “frames” of reference for gender become self-fulfilling prophecies as “humans have a tendency to look for evidence that supports their existing beliefs, causing them to be especially prone to discounting evidence that contradicts those beliefs” (p. 165; see also Leithäuser, 1976). Moreover, when one is in an uncertain situation or when these frames are threatened, as is often the case with gender-expansive

children, people tend to hold fast to these primary frames for guidance (West, 2014; Fisk & Ridgeway, 2018). This may be one reason why the experience for some parents can be challenging and emotional.

In his studies on neurobiological perspectives of learning, Edward Taylor (2001) recorded incidents on brain research relative to emotion and memory. In a study on implicit memory, he shared a story of French physician, Edouard Claparede, whose patient with amnesia could not create new memories. One day when introducing himself, as he did each morning, he inconspicuously held a tack in his hand which pricked her upon shaking it. The next day, when he introduced himself, she did not recognize him but refused to shake his hand even though she could offer no reason why. This conditioned response is an example of implicit memory, learning that takes place even when we are not consciously aware of it (Taylor 2001). I share this episode because it reminds me of the parents who could not explain their emotional response to their child's disclosure or transition. These "tacks" of the past are often hidden under years of experience and countless instances with gender identity instruction, whether it be through modelling in the media, chauvinistic slurs, homophobic taunts (for all, but especially males), transphobic taunts (for all), feminist ideals, conservative expectations, or an intersection of multiple, mixed, or even contradictory messages. Just as the woman could not recall why she was reluctant to shake the doctor's hand, so too do we experience emotions without recalling their causes, memories of feeling (West, 2014), until we unpack them to see what lies beneath. Dirkx asserts that his goal is to answer What? "What do these feelings feel like, remind me of? What other times have I felt this way, experienced these emotions? What was going on then? Who was involved in the incident?" (Dirkx, 2001, p. 69). Are today's pricks a connection to our past?

### ***Biographical Learning and Biographicity***

Learning, according to Mezirow (1996), "is understood as the process of using a prior interpretation to construe a new and revised interpretation of the meaning of one's experience in order to

guide future action” (p. 162). Peter Alheit, whose work in biographical learning gave voice to participants through narrative or autobiographical methods, gave weight to these “prior interpretation[s]” and how one’s past informs one’s present. Biographical learning is an interplay of the implicit dimension, the reflexive dimension, and the “self-willed” dimension (Alheit & Dausien, 2002). The implicit dimension is the accumulated knowledge that plays in the background, such as the gender frames of reference formed in one’s youth (Fisk & Ridgeway, 2018) or socially reinforced dispositions or habitus (Bourdieu, 1977). The sociality dimension focuses on the outer world with which one will interact and learns. While the implicit dimension is passive, the individuality dimension is active and where the individual feels they have autonomy and choice. If one experiences a discrepancy within the implicit dimension, when newer perspectives clash with prior knowledge, this experience can be a moment of self-education or the fracture of a meaning perspective and the possibility of emancipatory learning (Alheit & Dausien, 2002). Even more, Alheit (2018a) argues that “The modification of individual self- and world-referents – even in the limited context of specific life constructions – contains opportunities for the transformations of the institutional framework conditions of social existence” (p. 161). Whether personal or at the institutional level, however, learning begins with a person’s ability to recreate their internal understandings of the world through a process Alheit calls biographicity.

Alheit comments on our ability to recreate meanings in our lives through biographicity. He (1994) writes:

Biographicity means that we can redesign again and again, from scratch, the contours of our life within the specific contexts in which we (have to) spend it, and that we experience these contexts as ‘shapeable’ and designable. In our biographies, we do not possess all conceivable opportunities, but within the framework of the limits we are structurally set we still have considerable scope open to us. (p. 290)

Thus, when children's narratives of gender disrupt their parents' narratives about gender, there is considerable scope for parents to change the direction of their future script. During times of life transitions, Alheit suggests that biographical learning is both a "*constructivist achievement* of the individual integrating new experiences into the self-referential 'architectonic' of particular personal past experiences and a *social process* which makes subjects competent and able to actively shape and change their social world (italics in original, Alheit, 2018a, p. 162). The ability to biographicize, then, is the ability to play author and editor of your own narrative, writing and editing the setting, plot, characters, themes, in an effort to match your inner world with, your albeit limited view of, the outer world. It allows the protagonist to feel they are preserved when the world is, in fact, changing around them (Alheit, 2018a).

In the case of parents of gender-expansive children, many parents find their meaning perspectives of gender challenged. The parents from the support group I led often came with concerns about the way things *should* be and we spent time unpacking what exactly that meant. We discussed gender expectations and roles and how they came to be. Fisk and Ridgeway (2018) contend that "extensive socialization takes place to reproduce gendered roles and expectations, even when individuals do not necessarily agree with them but implicitly know that [they] will be held accountable to them" (p. 163). Newer understandings of gender, however, are nudging the rigid edges of definitions of female and male such that the frames themselves are evolving. Transgender individuals who "pass" well are gaining more acceptance, but as noted in Schilt's (2010) research, the "degree of acceptance fades the further they move away from embodying maleness or femaleness" (Fisk & Ridgeway, 2018, p. 167) and gender queer individuals are pressured, even from more liberal-minded people, to align with traditional genders (Fogarty & Zheng, 2018). Thus, parents of gender queer children may have a more challenging task than parents of transgender children who have transitioned and "pass" in their authentic gender. The

latter requires the ability to accommodate a “born in the wrong body” narrative, while the former suggests more complexity in gender, invoking discourse on gender fluidity or gender neutrality, and living outside gendered social norms. Psycho-critical transformative learning is the process of “examining the very premises of one’s thought system and confronting realities that no longer fit within one’s existing world view” (Lange, 2013, p. 109). For some parents, this process can mean a complete reorganization of gender paradigms and how they see the world.

Malpas (2011), who maps the gender traditions of all parents, shares an example of a father looking back on his own gender identity development, and his negative experiences with his father, to comprehend his revulsion for his child’s transformation. Malpas (2011) wrote, “Slowly, Jorge disentangled his self-perception from the one he had of his father” (p. 463) and then he was able to rebuild his relationship with his new daughter. In this way, he restructured his future narrative in direct contrast to past chapters of his life. In Coolhart and Shipman’s (2017) article on working toward family attunement, they share how they educate parents on how their own gender identity development through culture, religion, race/ethnicity, and class. This, they argue, gives parents a “fuller understanding of gender. As parents explore the origins of their beliefs, the clinician can gently challenge them to see how their view may be hurtful to their child” (p. 118). It is here, then, that parents may begin to recognize their gender identity as one “shaped by collectively generated and maintained roles, assumptions, images, and expectations associated with one’s race, class, or gender” (Brookfield, 2012, p. 139); that is, they see gender as socio-culturally constructed, reinforced and replicated through the generations. It is also here that parents begin questioning society’s role in creating family distress, and they affectively turn the lens from the child to society itself. By revisiting the past, Malpas, Coolhart, and Shipman’s clients are better able to understand their present and be the author of their future.

Ehrensaft (2011) supports this approach when emphasizing that “The biggest mistake many gender-accepting parents make is to sweep any negative feelings under the rug as being ‘politically incorrect,’ only to find that the feelings get relegated to unconscious malaise or free-floating conscious angst or irritability” (p. 541). She identifies three types of parents: transformers, transphobic, and transporters. Ehrensaft (2011) goes on to demonstrate the experience of the transformer parents below:

The transformers are the parents who have worked through and are comfortable in their own gender authenticity, whatever it may be, have the ego capacities to hold and metabolize anxiety and conflict, have the capacity to de-center and recognize their child as a separate person, and possess bonds of love to their child stalwart enough to transcend all other adversities that might intrude on their relationship with their child. . . . Some of them may have to go through a challenging or grueling psychological process in the evolution toward transformation. Others may have already embarked in such a process well before their child ever came to them, either because of their own gender journey or because of a personal existential and emotional sensitivity that permits expansiveness and creativity, rather than rigidity and conformity, in meeting with otherness, whether in family members or in the culture at large. (p. 539)

Ehrensaft does not, however, go into detail with readers about the “challenging or grueling psychological process in the evolution toward transformation” her clients experienced. These are subjective biographies are but few in the literature.

### ***Barriers for Learning***

The path of transformative learning can be harrowing. Mezirow (1991) writes, “The studies of Mezirow, Morgan, Williams, and Hunter all attest to the difficulties that perspective transformations involve for the learner and the typically difficult negotiation, compromise, stalling, backsliding, self-deception, and failure that one observes in transformational learning” (p. 171). Some fail to reconcile



their perspective crisis and slip into self-deception and neurosis (Shapiro, 1989). “It is not enough to understand intellectually the need to change the way one acts [or understands a perspective]; one requires emotional strength and an act or will in order to move forward” (Mezirow, 1991, p. 171). Others negotiate each experience of cognitive and affective dissonance alternatively conceding and receding and proceeding along the way (Maiese, 2017). It is the purpose of this study to illuminate these negotiations, to discover how one’s past education of gender identity both informs and comes into conflict with newer understandings of gender identity.

For a variety of reasons—from those who avoid disharmony, to those who lack the time, energy, or know-how to struggle with the disharmony, to others who refuse to consider constructs unaligned with their own—people choose not to learn. Thomas Leithäuser’s (1976) concept of “everyday consciousness” explores how people retain their beliefs despite proof against them. Illeris (2003) explains that “if elements in the influences do not correspond to the pre-understandings, they are either rejected or distorted to make them agree” (p. 403). People cling to their meanings perspectives as it becomes part of their “everyday consciousness,” how they interpret the world in the everyday. People have the tendency to accept like-minded ideas, dismissing those that differ or distorting information until it fits their paradigm. People, in this respect, hear only what they want to hear, and actively look for evidence that fits into their gender frames (Fisk & Ridgeway, 2018). Jarvis (2006) argues that internalized culture and belief systems are particularly prevailing. Of fundamentalist religious and political systems, he says, “These approaches to belief not only give the believer a sense of knowing the ‘truth’ but also, therefore, a sense of security. They are affectively extremely powerful. Consequently, there is a tendency to reject learning opportunities that would threaten such a person or social belief system” (Jarvis, 2006, p. 94). Relating to the experiences of parents of gender-expansive children, these parents either might avoid disharmony and allow transition, avoid facing disjuncture for as long as

possible, or refuse to engage in a belief system that differs from their own. Although it is not in my interest to study non-learning situations, recognizing that transformative learning frequently comes with barriers to learning, often barriers of one's own making, may be just as informative to this study as a learning journey free of them.

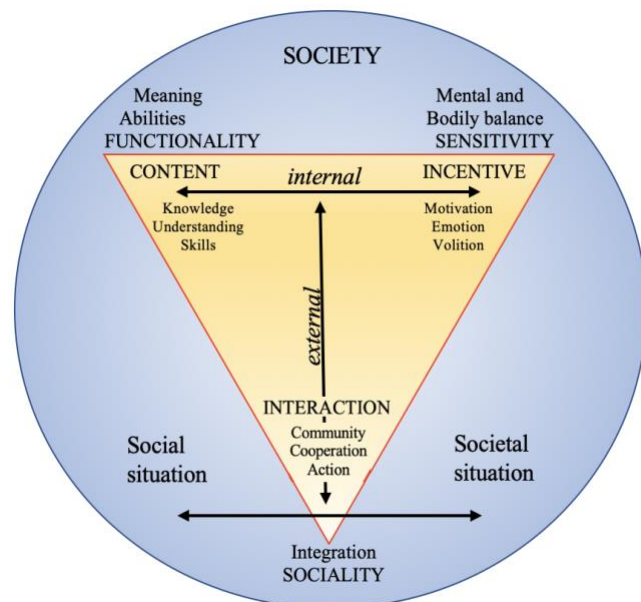
## Conceptual framework

This study aimed to explore and analyze the transformative experiences a parent undergoes as they reconcile conventional Western beliefs with emerging conceptualizations about gender identity development. This literature review has revealed that although research is being conducted on gender-expansive children and transfamilies, predominantly from clinicians, a dearth of research exists on the journey of parents themselves, and more particularly their learning experiences. What role does the parent's own gender identity development play in their learning? What domains of holistic learning take charge at various stages of the learning process and how do they

prevent or promote learning? How is the parent's own life reinterpreted in light of transition and what does this process look like? Because the past can play an integral role in transformative learning, I

**Figure 3**

*Dimensions of Holistic Learning, Internal and External Factors*



*Note. Adapted from How we Learn: Learning and non-learning in school and beyond (2<sup>nd</sup> ed., p. 27 and 93), by K. Illeris, 2017.*

Routledge. Copyright 2017 by Knud Illeris.

employed 1) biographical learning, as interpreted by Peter Alheit, with a focus on the participant's personal gender education and experience and 2) Knud Illeris's conception of holistic learning (see Figure 3) as a conceptual lens to analyze how parents navigate the tensions often catalyzed at the disclosure or discovery of their child's gender-expansive nature.

Biographical research stems from constructivist epistemology and it was my epistemological assumption that parents have built meaning perspectives for gender and gender identity, and for many parents these meaning perspectives are challenged when their children present a new perspective that fails to align with their own. Moreover, it is realistic to suggest that it is not the whole concept of gender and gender identity that fails to align, but particular aspects that either fail to align or are contradicted by coexisting beliefs. For instance, a parent may accept that there is a gender spectrum and their child is transgender, but they may still struggle when their child dresses gender queer, presenting as both male and female. That is, long-standing homophobia or transphobia may unwittingly generate uncomfortable or unsettling feelings within the parent. Cognitively, there may be understanding, but like the tack that is still felt long after the patient could remember its origins, so too the parent feels the sting of the past, a long-held, yet unchallenged, meaning perspective that is in want of unpacking and analysis. Within this framework I considered how the past informed the present, how the parent's experiences with gender informed their negotiations with their child, if it indeed did so. My purpose was to explore the "unpacking" of parents' meaning perspectives that come into conflict with the common sites of family tension during transition—the nature of gender, evolving sexualities, gender identity, personal identity, and family—to better understand the holistic transformative learning that may take place. Some struggle to biographicize or to recreate the world of gender they understand and know, and yet as a form of learning and adapting, it can mean the difference between the family that pulls together or the family that pulls apart.

## Summary

This chapter has provided background on transfamilies and evidence that research on the learning experiences of parents of gender-expansive children is minimal at best. It is notable that gender is taken up differently in various cultures, and gender diversity, as expressed by the Faa'afine and the two-spirit people, can become a positive part of one's culture. Much of gender is cultural, we learn to "do gender" (West & Zimmerman, 1987), and queer and transgender theorists "transgress" the gender binary, pushing against the culturally made boundaries to reveal the illusion. Parents in this study have lived in a culture where they, too, learned to "do gender" and reinforce gender expectations; subsequently, they had much learning to do and undo. In the next chapter, due to the cultural and biographical nature of my research, I turn to life history and autoethnographic research for the methodology and methods.

### Chapter 3: Methodology and Methods

*“I’ve realized that one of the advantages of the questions you asked us about our own experience with gender and our own identities and so on is that they’ve made me reflect on my experience which makes me better able to support Alex, because I’m more clear about me.” (Amelia, interview)*

#### Introduction

The aim of this research was to document and analyze the emotional and intellectual transformative (Mezirow, 1978) experiences a parent undergoes as they reconcile conventional Western beliefs with emerging conceptualizations about gender identity development. The research questions that accompanied this purpose were as follows:

- To what extent did the parents experience transformative learning (Mezirow, 1978), and how did they make the cognitive-affective shift from where they were to where they are today?
- How does a parent’s own gender identity development inform their interpretation of the gender transition of the child?
- How do parents of gender expansive children navigate the tensions that are created within a family when a child rejects gendered norms?

Due to the subjective nature of the study, that is, the exploration of personal meanings, motivations, and the emotional worlds of parents, it was natural to turn to qualitative research methods and methodology. The first two research questions, in particular, led me to life history research and autoethnography. In this section, I will discuss the rationale for selecting life history methodology and methods for my participants and autoethnographic methods as a means of interrogating my own experience. I will introduce the participants briefly and then describe the research setting, data sources, data collection methods, and analysis methods. I will end this chapter with a brief discussion on the issues of trustworthiness, the limitations and delimitations of the study, and ethical considerations.

## **Rationale for life history research approach**

Life history research is a narrative research method hailing from the health sciences and anthropology. It was appropriate for my study as it “explore[s] a person’s micro-historical (individual) experiences within a macro-historical (history of the time) framework” (Hagemaster, 1992). Parental narratives often reflected their personal histories with gender, personal histories that played out within a larger social history. This study allowed subjects to look back into their own experiences with gender identity formation, to consider if these experiences did in fact have an impact on their cognitive and affective processing of the transition of their gender-expansive child. Petra Munro (1998) aptly described life history research when she penned the introduction to her collection of women teacher life histories, *Subject to fiction*:

I know I cannot “collect” a life. Narrative does not provide a better way to locate truth, but in fact reminds us that all good stories are predicated on the quality of the fiction. We live many lives. Consequently, the life histories in this book do not present neat, chronological accounts of women’s lives. . . . Instead, my understanding of a life history suggests that we need to attend to the silences as well as what is said, that we need to attend to how the story is told as well as what is told or not told, and to attend to the tensions and contradictions rather than succumb to the temptations to gloss over these in our desire to “the” story. (p. 12-13)

My life history research attended to the narratives of gender, in the present, in the past, and projected into the future and attempted to give voice to the silences.

Context was central to this study. In order to understand the narratives of my participants today, I needed to understand their backstory, the historical and social structures that molded and shaped them. What perceptions and experiences were influenced by family members? By their educational experiences? By their socioeconomic status? Their gender? Their culture, race, ethnicity, religion? “By

providing contextual data,” wrote Goodson and Sikes (2010), “the life stories can be seen in the light of changing patterns of time and space in testimony and action as social constrictions” (p. 18). Knowing not only the personal history (micro-history) but the broader historical context (Goodson & Sikes, 2010) helped me to comprehend how a life had been shaped and how it continued to be shaped by experience. “It is crucial therefore that biography be located in a larger tapestry of individual, community, and institutional enquiry” (Dhunpath, 2000, p. 545) to ensure that we read the participant in context.

Life history is not, however, biography. Dhunpath (2000) argues that “the focus is not on the factual accuracy of the story constructed, but on the meaning it has for the respondent” (p. 545). Humans use stories to organize their experiences, to make meaning of their lives, and to relate their lives to one another. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) reason that we use stories to organize our experiences and knowledge about the private and public worlds. Not only are our narratives often inaccurate, used as a tool to navigate ourselves in a changing world, but our protagonist, too, is constantly changing and adjusting to that changing world. Dhunpath (2000) continued, “Moreover, narrative research emphasizes personal stories and narratives, the intensely individual nature of each person’s experiences and people constantly remaking themselves as an active, ongoing social project” (p. 545). While biography succeeds at taking snapshots of a person within a timeframe, the life historian’s protagonist is animated, moving in a life that is itself a kaleidoscope of movement.

Another characteristic of life history is its frank look at human messiness. Goodson and Sikes (2010) contend that quantitative methods “sidestep the messy confrontation with human subjectivity which we believe should comprise the heartland of the sociological enterprise” (p. 8). Humans negotiate and renegotiate their identities as they experience the world (Goodson & Sikes, 2010) until they have variations of themselves or layers of themselves, often contradicting layers that lie dormant until a situation forces them to converge. I experienced this myself when my Latter-day Saint (LDS) values

from my youth collided with my more socially liberal values. When my child emerged as transgender, I did not know how to respond. I did not have a frame of reference for this experience, so the layers of myself arose and did battle. But the life history researcher recognizes that even in battle, a life should be studied holistically (Cole & Knowles, 2001; Goodson & Sikes, 2010), the cognitive, affective, and social/societal domains working through the conflict in concert.

As a final point, I could not propose life history as a methodology for analyzing gender without noting its potential to reveal power structures present in a person's life, family circle, and enveloping society. When a natal son transitions to female or a natal daughter transitions to male, it often disrupts the power dynamics within the household, even if it is simply over traditional gendered roles or chores, such as who takes out the garbage or clears the table (Norwood, 2010; Pearlman, 2006). Power and privilege are also evident when family and societal members choose to educate or reinforce gendered ways of being, acting, moving, talking, and even thinking. In Pascoe's (2008) "Dude, you're a fag: Adolescent masculinity and the fag discourse," we see male adolescents policing their own behavior. Pascoe explains that "becoming a fag has as much to do with failing at the masculine tasks of competence, heterosexual prowess and strength or in any way revealing weakness or femininity, as it does with a sexual identity" (p. 330). If not done "correctly," learning to "do gender" (West & Zimmerman, 1987) can be a heart-rending education. When my own child, for instance, failed to open the door for me, power dynamics were at play—my indoctrinated sense of chivalry (which remains a "courtesy" in Western society) versus my feminist notions of gender and whether I should now play into this gendered ritual and teach my son to uphold gendered norms. Natal males who transition also experience shifting power dynamics within the family, often losing access to power (Connell, 2010). Dhunpath (2000) argues that human relationships are "inherently political and deeply embedded in relations of power" (p. 544) and that "the life history approach is probably the only authentic means of



understanding how motives and practices reflect the intimate intersection of institutional and individual experience in the postmodern world” (p. 544). By delving into each participant’s past, to comprehend not only their personal history but the social dynamics, political influences, and cultural norms of the time period, I gained a better understanding of the power structures at play in the participant’s life and appreciated how these structures informed their understandings of their changing world.

Life history research’s emphasis on understanding context by turning to macro-history while studying an individual’s micro-history is appropriate for this study. This approach allowed me to illuminate the power structures at play in the participants’ lives, to avoid the temptation to dissect a life into artificial parts, and to analyze each life holistically. Finally, this approach allowed for and perhaps even relished in the messiness of lives, the contradictions, the misremembering, and the unique standpoint of each member of the human race.

### **Autoethnographic research approach**

As defined by Adams, et al. (2014), autoethnography uses the researcher’s experience to reflexively and critically analyze the culture and experiences of themselves and, at times, their participants. They (2014) argue that autoethnographers typically 1) foreground personal experience in research, 2) demonstrate the sense-making process (such as transformative learning) 3) illustrate reflexivity, 4) participate as insiders in a cultural experience, 5) critique cultural norms and practices, and 6) seek responses of the audience. As a parent to a transgender son and former PFLAG support group leader, I connected with the participants as an insider. In fact, before gaining permission to recruit from two support groups who supported this study (see next section), I was asked to meet personally with each of them to be vetted. My own life history uniquely prepared me to be entrusted with the stories of their support group members. I shared similar mental, emotional, physical and psychological

experiences that are common to most parents. Because I had “been there,” my participants appeared more ready to talk.

This was quite unlike my Master’s research when I studied the experiences of African American alumnae from the private school where I taught. The fact that I was white was a limitation of my study as it may have affected the depth or quality of the interviews. As noted by Troy Duster in the forward of *Racing Research, Researching Race: Methodological Dilemmas in Critical Race Studies* (Duster, 2000), although all his interviewers received the same training, his black interviewers usually returned with richer data that often included more sensitive material. He explained that "Some of the most important 'concerns and issues' never surfaced for the white interviewers, because the group being interviewed never headed down the road to frame the question in such a manner in the first place" (p. xiii). Thus, although I did my best to establish a comfortable, trusting atmosphere within which to conduct an interview, my own skin color and accompanying white privilege may have affected the conversation itself. For this study, I am an insider who is intimately familiar with the experiences of my participants. In fact, as I will discuss shortly, I was able to address questions in my autoethnography that may have been too sensitive for even my participants to openly discuss. For example, it is not easy to admit when you have uncomfortable feelings about your own child, feelings such as disappointment, regret, embarrassment, discomfort, or even disgust. In an autoethnography which foregrounds the topic under study and analyzes my own experiences reflexively and critically within a sociocultural context, I have the opportunity to ask myself these tough questions. It was through this autoethnographic analysis that I was able to untangle personal aspects of my self from the socio-cultural dimensions of my self and to grapple with the complexities of gender and the implications of my own child’s gender transition.

Before each section in the findings, I have shared my autoethnographic research and analysis based on my own observations, reflections, personal journal entries, and essays written on topics related

to gender. I have included some journal entries that I wrote while my child was transitioning, as well as a journal entry from my son and a card he gave me for one birthday. I reflected after interviews, moving puzzle pieces into place just as other jigsawed pieces arose from the data. Some reflections were of significant moments or turning points in my own personal growth, but some were of moments of resistance or discomfort. Finally, during my first year in the graduate program, I had the opportunity to reflect on and write about my curious life history with gender. In these ways, I reflexively wrote about my experiences throughout my life, tracing the sense-making process of transformative learning, and ultimately critiquing the social norms that reinforce the gender binary that is deeply engrained in Western society.

The autoethnographer can also “fill the gaps” in the storylines of their participants. “It is here, in the spaces in existing stories—as told in the research, artifacts and texts, films, books, and blogs—where autoethnographers add their voices to ongoing conversations” (Adams et al., 2014, p. 49).

Autoethnographers allows themselves to become vulnerable, to say what is difficult to say, to reveal what might be too painful to reveal. Certainly, I experienced this as I heard stories of transition and how challenging it was, how demanding it was to be the supportive parent. However, the feelings of discomfort, disappointment (with the child or with the parent), the fear of others, one’s own transphobia, are experiences that may be more difficult to divulge because they can make a parent feel ashamed. These are the spaces where the autoethnographer can explore. For instance, in the findings section I investigated the experience I had of feeling discomfort when my son was publicly gender bending (presenting both as male and female). Through reflection and vulnerability, I was able to recognize that my concern for his safety was tied up in my personal transphobia, and I explored where this discomfort originated.

I have worked to meet the four goals of autoethnography (Adams et al., 2014): 1) to make contributions to knowledge, 2) to value both the personal and the experiential, 3) to tell life stories with power and dignity, and 4) to be responsible with regard to representation of others' stories. It was often through my own writing that epiphanies came to me regarding the research I was conducting with my participants. I have tried to tell our stories with dignity and authenticity, protecting the privacy and dignity of the participants and my son. As an insider, autoethnographic research allowed me to share my own stories with those of the participants, to fill in the spaces, and be a voice who speaks the words only shared by those most vulnerable.

### **Research setting, participants, and recruitment**

The research for this study was conducted in the city of Calgary, Alberta, Canada and its surrounding areas. Calgary is the third largest municipality in Canada with a young (average age of 36), diverse (28% visible minorities), and growing population of 1.2 million people (The city of Calgary, 2018). It is situated where the prairies and the Rocky Mountain foothills meet, and although Alberta has been traditionally conservative, Calgarians have shifted left on social issues according to CBC articles such as “Albertans aren't as conservative as you might think, poll suggests” (Anderson, 2018) and “Calgary is conservative all right but not the way you might think” (Elliot, 2015). Within Calgary, there are three established LGBTQ organizations that provide support for family members of gender-expansive children. I contacted the facilitators of these groups to gain permission to invite those who attend to participate in this study. I attended one support group, introduced to them my study, and left flyers. The second organization met with me and then sent an email to their parents personally introducing my study and attached my flyer. I had difficulty contacting the third group, but since I solicited enough participants from the first two organizations, I ceased my efforts to secure a time to meet with them. Sixteen volunteers for the study contacted me by email, each with a gender-expansive

child and each with at least a six-month history of knowing of their child's gender identity.

### **Data collection methods**

I collected data from a triangulation of sources: interviews, journals, and my own autoethnography. During the first interview, I began by carefully explaining the purpose of this study, the participant's role in the study, and the terms of the study (see Ethical Considerations below), including the fact that our conversations were to be recorded. Then, I began by disclosing my personal connection to the study, that is, the transition of my own child at 13 and my interest in the lives of other parents who share this experience.

Initially, I had planned to have parents complete a genogram, a family tree that has been traditionally employed in the medical field to map hereditary or psychological patterns. My main purpose was to generate conversation, to trigger familial memories relevant to their own sense of gender in the world, and to have a visual representation of the make-up of their family, including LGBTQ2S+ members. After the third interview I conducted, however, I dispensed with this activity as participants came ready to talk and this activity seemed to impede the flow of the conversation and added little to the data. Instead, for the fourth interview, I began directly with the interview questions.

The following is a list of prompts, adapted from Goodson & Sikes (2010) and Cole & Knowles (2001), I used for the first interview with each participant. More important than covering all the questions in the list was my ability to create a setting where the participants "begin to talk freely about their experiences, transitions, concerns and missions" (Goodson & Gill, 2011, p. 39) or what Goodson and Gill (2011) call "flow." Prompts for this interview included:

- Where and when were you born?
- Where is your family from? Mother? Father?
- What is your heritage, including racial background and ethnic culture?

- What were your parents' occupations? What were they like? What were their interests?
- What were your brothers and sisters like? What were your experiences with them?
- What would you say was your socioeconomic class growing up? Was it easy growing up?
- What were the political or religious influences in your home?
- What was your childhood like? Can you describe your home? Were chores separated by gender?  
How did you learn about gender (roles, expectations) at home?
- What was your experience with extended family? What were their occupations and characteristics? What did you learn about gender roles from them?
- While growing up, what was your community like? How would you describe its character and "feel"? What did you learn about gender from your community? Church? School?
- What was your experience like at school? What were your favorite subjects? What were your peer relations like? What did you learn about gender at school? When did the genders seem to separate into boys and girls or did it always feel that way?
- What have you learned about gender from past experiences at work?
- What have you learned about gender from social media, film, or tv?
- Did you enjoy being a little girl/boy? Did this ever change? Do you enjoy being a woman/man?
- Do you feel that you developed a self of woman/manhood over the years or do you feel you have an inborn sense of your gender? Or is it a combination of both?
- Do you think your identity (not your gender identity but sense of who you are as a person) is developed by the experiences you have in life or do you think you have an inborn sense of who you are? Or is it a combination of both?
- Do you feel that families should stick together no matter what? Or do you feel that there are certain things a member could do that would just cross the line?

The first meeting focused mainly on the gender identity development of the participants themselves and I relied on the participant to determine what was relevant and what was not (Cole & Knowles, 2001). I also asked the participant their thoughts about three of the four areas of tension that were identified in previous studies on families with gender-expansive members (McGuire et al., 2016b; Norwood, 2010); namely, the essence of gender, the sovereignty of identity, and the supportive role of the family. By listening to the participant's reasoning, I was able to gauge each parent's current understanding of gender (whether they saw gender as a binary or along a spectrum and whether it was biologically determined or culturally developed or both), of identity (whether they felt their child was the "same person" regardless of transition or whether they sensed their child had changed), and of family (whether the family should stick together regardless or not). I saved questions regarding trans identity for the second interview but explored them when they arose naturally in the interview. There was one exception: over the phone, Kelley moved into her story of her child's transition in the first interview and it seemed unnatural to change direction. For her, we explored her upbringing in interview 2. There were also "researchable moments," much like those "teachable moments," that ought to be explored when they presented themselves (Cole & Knowles, 2001). The recordings of the interviews were transcribed after the session for analysis, plus my written notes on each interview were kept in a notebook.

From what I have read about narrative inquiry and life history research, asking participants to journal is risky. Not only do some participants dislike writing, but many write *for* the researcher, writing what they think the researcher would want to hear rather than writing authentically (Goodson & Sikes, 2010). Yet, I felt it necessary to ask participants to perform a simple writing task, especially after the interviews where we spent time unearthing memories of the participant's own socialization with gender. After the first interview, I presented the participant with a thin journal and asked them to write about an experience shared in the interview that seems to be significant. They could also type their responses or

use other media to record their thoughts. I suggested that they write any of their insights, connections, or even ramblings in the journal. Half the participants chose to journal in some form—five wrote in journals, three journaled via a Word document, and one used a writing app on her tablet. The journaling not only enriched my understanding of participants’ thoughts, feelings and experiences, but they enriched the participants’ own understandings of gender. For instance, Amelia typed, “Oh wow. Within moments of writing this, and of trying then (unsuccessfully) to get back to sleep, I realized something, a big ah ha.... What makes a woman?” Similarly, Dawn wrote, “This is the aha moment. It looks like I’ve spent my entire adult life trying to ‘normalize’ circumstances – and I’m still doing it.” From these journal entries, I realized that the conversations we had during the interview continued long after I left. Journaling allowed some of them to process conversations, organize their thoughts, and was possibly a therapeutic exercise (Goodson & Sikes, 2010). At the end of the interview process, I collected the journals, dictated the hand-written ones into a speech-to-text app, and then had one richer source of data for coding.

During the second interview, questions focused more on “today” and where they were in their relationship with their child. It was also possible that the parent arrived having had time to ponder their own gender education, so they were primed for an interview focusing on the present but with an eye on the past. Unlike the first interview where I asked numerous questions to get an understanding of the historical autobiography of the participant, this time I asked fewer questions to allow more time for the participant to tell their story and to elicit flow. Questions for this interview included the following:

- My study is on the experiences of parents of gender-expansive children. Could you tell me your story of your child?
- What prior experiences with trans people have you had?
- Did you experience feelings of loss? And if so, why do you think you feel this way?



- Some people feel that gender identity is innate, or that you were “born that way.” Other people feel you are born male or female and that’s it. Still others think that life experiences can influence how you feel about gender. What are your feelings on this?
- What was your emotional journey like? What were some of the more difficult things to learn emotionally?
- What was your thought processes like? What were some conflicts you needed to address? What were your thought processes in addressing these conflicts?
- Do you feel there is a connection between your personal experiences in the past and your ability to parent a gender-expansive child?
- You have been on a journey of sorts with your child. Some parents say they have changed along the way, in the way they think about things or feel about things. Do you feel you have changed in the way you think or the way you feel?

It was my hope that our conversations would progressively transition from life storytelling to life history, a personal narrative set within its historical context (Goodson & Gill, 2011). Having spent time exploring the participant’s life history in the first interview and fleshing out the historical context of their gender identity development, I had a backstory for their current relationship with their child. Thus these “grounded conversations” (Goodson & Gill, 2011, p. 40) were contextual. Cole and Knowles (2001) expressed this filtering process as follows: “We rely on participants to sift out the relevant details, remembering that what is essential for us is that they help to construct the meaning of their experiences, the meanings of their lives in context” (p. 81). Some participants were still processing their child’s transition so witnessing this ability to sift through relevant details to construct meaning was particularly informative. This was true especially for Amelia whose child had been expressing himself as gender fluid but who had decided at the time of the interviews to transition fully to female. That is, for

some of her interview, I was not getting a report of how cognitive and emotional constructions *were* made but was witnessing to the constructions themselves.

After analyzing the data from the first two interviews (data analysis methods below), a third interview followed in most cases. The purpose of this interview was three-fold: to ask clarifying questions from the first two interviews, to allow the participant to expand on anything they had pondered on or processed since the first two interviews, and to retrieve the journals. At the close of the interviews, I collected the journals which would be returned after transcription.

### **Data analysis methods**

**Coding.** Unlike quantitative analysis which follows data collection, “life historians tend to the view that analysis begins as soon as they start working with an informant” (Goodson & Sikes, 2010, p. 34). Life history researchers document and reflect throughout the data collection phase, bracketing in possible themes, making connections, and recognizing the researcher effect, that their very presence may influence how the story is told. Adhering to the advice of Saldaña (2013), I manually coded the interviews and journals inductively to become intimately familiar with the text and to determine themes within the data inductively. I used process coding because the goal of this study is to document the transformative experiences of parents and to understand their learning processes. Corbin and Strauss (2008) employ process coding when they search for "ongoing action/interaction/emotion taken in to situations, or problems, often with the purpose of reaching a goal or handling a problem" (p. 96-7). When coding using the process method, elements of story-line, with its twin stars flashback and foreshadowing, come into play. This narrative feature cues the researchers to sequences or, at times, events that the participant perceives as sequential.

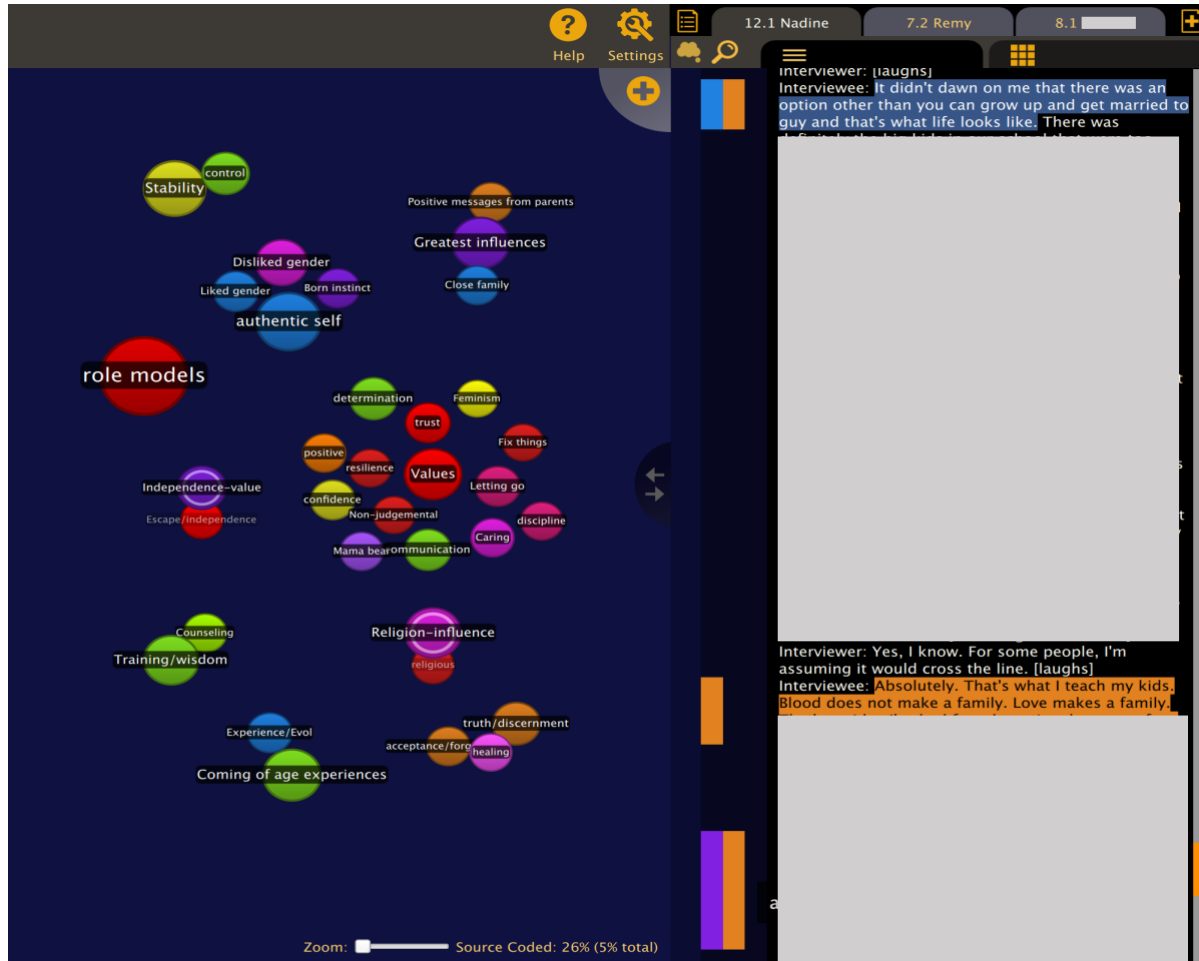
I then applied computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software, Quirkos v2.2.1, for the second round of coding. Themes from the second set of coding followed a deductive approach as I

looked to the data with my three research questions in mind. This approach led to a third coding of the participants' values. After coding the data twice, I noticed that values were often at the heart of decisions participants made, and conflicting values often created tension. Affective coding methods, according to Saldaña (2013), "investigate subjective qualities of human experience . . . by directly acknowledging and naming those experiences" (p. 86). Values coding, in particular, pinpoints a participant's values, attitudes, and belief systems. Values coding not only identifies personal values, but cultural values, intrapersonal values, hidden values (such as when you learn the value of family when you lose a member) or conflicting values (such as when your childhood values conflict with emerging values in adulthood).

An example of how qualitative data was coded in Quirkos v2.2.1 is in Figure 3 and Figure 4 below. I chose not to add my own voice to the data analyzed as part of the participant group, but coded it as a separate set. The trajectory of the autoethnography did not follow that of the study participants. Although I did address the interview questions, my writing for the autoethnography was not limited to these questions and it not only reflected my own experiences but of my reflections as a researcher who is, in many ways, still learning. In effect, the autoethnography itself was richer, but messier, so it seemed reasonable to keep the participant interviews together as one comparable set, and then to look to mine as a separate set. However, the autoethnography was analyzed alongside the participant data in the Findings section and became part of the Discussion. My voice will emerge at the beginning of each section in the Findings to foreground each section, providing context for the themes that emerge in each segment, and delving into the themes with vulnerability, reflexivity, and a re-evaluation of my own experience. My voice will then join the others in the Discussion section when our experiences will be discussed as a whole.

**Figure 4.**

*Sample of Qualitative Data Coding in Quirkos v2.2.1*



Note. The diagram is a visual representation of the themes (values) that emerged in the data.

To the right, quotations from Nadine's interview are colour-coded to reflect these themes.

**Figure 5.**

*Sample of Themes (values) Coded in Quirkos v2.2.1*



**Analysis.** As stated above, analysis for narrative researchers begins during the first interview. Analysis for the life history researcher does not follow a set method or procedure (Cole & Knowles, 2001); rather, it is a messy process. Life history researcher, Ken Plummer (2005) provides a vivid description of the process:

In many ways this is the truly creative part of the work. It entails brooding and reflecting upon mounds of data for long periods of time until it “makes sense” and “feels right,” and key ideas and themes flow from it. It is also the hardest process to describe: the standard technique is to read and make notes, leave and ponder, reread without notes, make new notes, match notes up, reread, and so on. (p. 152)

After coding, I had themes upon which to “brood and reflect” but my conceptual framework provided a lens through which I analyzed each life history, comparing stories, themes, values, perceptions, and life choices. My conceptual framework allowed me to analyze a parent’s biographical life history, aspects of learning within their lives, and how they applied their prior understandings of gender to newer perceptions gender to make meaning of their child’s transition.

At this point, I could get to the heart of the study: what does this data say about the transformative experiences of parents of gender-expansive children? I addressed the three research questions by exploring how parents navigated the tensions created (if they were indeed created). Did parents rely on their own gender identity education to inform their relationship with their child? What were the commonalities and differences between the participants’ stories with regard to holistic learning? And finally, did parents see their experiences as transformative learning and, if so, how did they make the cognitive-affective shifts necessary for change? By listening to the recordings, to what was said and what was not, I combed through the transcriptions multiple times, identified power dynamics lying beneath the surface, and noted patterns within their transformative learning experiences.

When I worked through the “mounds of data” and the answers to my research questions began to “make sense” and each thoughtful interpretation and fresh insight “felt right,” I was ready to proceed with writing the findings and discussion.

### **Issues of trustworthiness**

To assure credibility, confirmability, and dependability, I have attended to the following considerations. This study had limited transferability.

**Credibility.** Triangulation of data through 2-3 extensive interviews, the journals, and the autoethnography allowed me to hear participants’ stories, ask for clarification, offer opportunities for retellings, and to reflect deeply on my own experiences. Most importantly, regarding reliability in life history research, it is not the historical accuracy of the narratives participants tell that matters so much as the meaning it makes for the participant. It was through their narratives that I discovered how they learned, how they navigated tension within their families or within themselves, and how their histories informed their present, thus content validity was high. The criteria for credibility was satisfied through the rich data I collected, rigorous analyses of the data, and all conclusions confirmed by my three committee members.

**Transferability.** I have been cognizant of the fact that qualitative studies often have small samples, as did my study. I employed convenience sampling by asking for volunteers through two local support groups and although the sample of parents may be considered representative of Calgary’s socioeconomic class, education levels, and gender, it was not representative of race and ethnicity. All participants were white, one ethnically Hispanic. This study is only transferable in that the thick description of their experiences had common elements, patterns to their learning paths that were not unlike those I witnessed as a support group facilitator, all of whom were shared by white parents. Thus

this study demonstrates some transferability, but stories told by parents of differing cultures, ethnicities, and race may shed light on tensions unique to their experience.

**Confirmability.** When sharing my story in one of my graduate classes, a fellow student with a strong background in quantitative studies questioned my ability to conduct my research without bias. Admittedly, she had a point as this research is personal to me and I am both insider and outsider. While it was also what drove me in my work, I was aware that I could be vulnerable to “hearing what I expected to hear” or tempted to “lead the witness” in my interviews. For this reason, I exercised auditability by keeping a reflexive journal in which I not only left my impressions but a “decision trail” (Hagemaster, 1992, p. 1124) outlining my rationale for drawing conclusions and making decisions regarding the data. This audit trail also demonstrates congruence with conclusions drawn and ensures that I regularly connected back to the study’s central three questions as I wrote. I began the reflexive journal, recording my thoughts, insights, and questions as I wrote the critical literature review in this dissertation. When interviewing began, I added “comments on the inquiry process along with the preliminary analyses or attempting to make sense of the event” (Cole & Knowles, 2001, p. 77).

**Dependability.** Following my design outlined in the data collection methods and analysis sections (above), I used the codes and categories to guide me in the analysis, leaving an audit trail with the rationale for my decision-making. My supervisor and committee members reviewed the material with me and provided inter-rater reliability to ensure that I was following protocol and interpreting the participants’ communications sufficiently. This “transparency of method” (Merriam, 1998) demonstrates dependability.

### **Limitations and delimitations**

As a qualitative study, we sacrifice breadth for depth. The stories told by these parents shared common aspects but are each was unique and not representative of every parent of a gender-expansive



child. Calgary, although growing in diversity, has only a 28% visible minority (The City of Calgary, 2018) and from my history of leading a support group, most attendees were women, thus the diversity of participants may be a limitation. I was, in fact, appreciative that six of the participants were male, that is, 38% of participants were fathers. Another common limitation of narrative studies is that participants often choose which version of the story to tell (Goodson & Sikes, 2010). People are storytellers, but the versions of the story differ depending on their audience, whether it be an eight-year-old, the landlord, a best friend, or a university researcher whom you have never met. Each of these limitations must be recognized in biographical research.

An important delimitation concerns where parents are on their journey. For instance, while the research on a distraught parent who has just discovered their child is transgender might be informative, I take the risk of playing the role of counsellor. In the role of researcher, it would be prudent to wait until the parent has actually worked through some of the more intense emotional aspects of being a parent new to the process of transition. I remember sitting in a support group, raw with emotion, thinking I did not need to write my experience down because I could never forget it. Now, ten years later, the details are fuzzy; I would make an unreliable participant because I cannot remember the sequence of events nor could I provide details. Thus, a good candidate for this study would be one whose discovery or disclosure of their gender-variant child was between six months and six years, depending on the parent. These are, however, guidelines and not rules. I did meet with Freda, for instance, who has known for seven years and although Amelia and Martin's child came out as gender fluid three years ago, during the study, she confided in them that she would be proceeding with full transition.

### **Ethical Considerations**

The nature of this study is personal and, for some, highly sensitive in nature especially if the child's gender identity is private. For these reasons, ethical considerations were carefully considered to

protect participants' confidentiality and anonymity. First, I gained permission to conduct this study through the University of Calgary's Conjoint Faculties Research Ethics Board. Then once the study began, I 1) ensured the participant and their family members remained anonymous and had the opportunity to choose their own pseudonym(s), 2) assured confidentiality when using an audio recorder and during transcription, 3) informed the participant that they would have the opportunity to read over and discuss with me the transcriptions, and 4) was clear that I owned the tapes, journals (if not requested to have returned) and transcripts but that all data would be stored safely and used for the purpose of this dissertation. I appreciate the sensitive nature of this study and the parents who willingly shared personal revelations about themselves and their families for the benefit of others.

## **Summary**

In this chapter, I began by establishing a rationale for choosing life history research for this study, and then discussed the data sources, participants, and collection methods. A life narrative told within historical context would allow me to better understand a parent's thought processes and actions. The narrative nature of my study called for descriptive and process coding methods, whereas the sensitivity of the material suggested that I employ affective coding methods, such as values coding. The autoethnography allowed me to explore the gaps in the research and to reveal truths that might be ineffable by the parents in the study, such as their own feelings of transphobia. For analysis, I returned to my conceptual framework and revisited the research questions that ultimately guided this study. Throughout the interview, analysis, and writing phases of this research, I recognized the responsibility I had to maintain the dignity and confidentiality of each participant and to tell their life histories knowing that this is but one chapter of many in their ever-evolving life narratives.

## **Chapter 4: Findings**

*“Having felt like I lost my child and like I just didn't know who she was, I experienced a pivotal moment when she and I were sitting on the sofa side by side and as I looked into her eyes—I saw her soul. It was the same soul that I had come to know and love for all those years. I felt relief and comfort along with understanding that this was the same person.” (Dawn, journal)*

### **Context for the Findings**

This study's purpose was to explore the emotional and cognitive transformative (Mezirow, 1978) experiences a parent undergoes as their child challenges traditional Western gender norms and gender identity development. A better understanding of this process will allow parents to personally navigate the experience more smoothly and to ultimately be a better support system for their child. This chapter presents the findings of 16 participants with whom I conducted 43 in-depth interviews, 9 journals written by the participants, and my own autoethnography, all of which were analyzed through a deductive and inductive process both manually and using Quirkos v2.2.1 qualitative analysis software. I will begin this chapter with an introduction to the participants and then shift to the analysis of the three dominant themes that arose from the interviews.

### **A Brief Introduction to the Participants**

The following section includes a description of each participant in the study which details their background, how many times we met, whether they met with me alone or as a couple, how their child identified at the time of the study, and whether they kept a journal for the study. Table 1 provides some of the demographic information of the participants including ethnicity and/or race, age, socioeconomic status, gender of child, and age of child upon disclosure. My own description is woven into my autoethnographic writing prefacing each Finding section below.

**Table 1.***Biographical Information: 16 participants plus researcher*

Parent pseudonym	Relation to child	Child's pseudonym	Child's affirmed gender	Child's age at revelation	Years since revelation	Number of interviews/kept journal
<b>*Dawn</b>	Mother	Ava	MTF	21-30	4	3; yes
<b>*Adam</b>	Father	Ava	MTF	21-30	4	3; yes
<b>Freda</b>	Mother	Ivory	MTF	21-30	7	3; yes
<b>•Kendra</b>	Mother	Alice	MTF	21-30	4	3; no
<b>•Mike</b>	Father	Alice	MTF	21-30	4	2; no
<b>Kit</b>	Father	Renee	MTF	21-30	--	2; yes
<b>Gloria</b>	Mother	Xavier	FTM	21-30	3	3; no
<b>°Remy</b>	Father	Noel	Non-binary	11-20	2	2; no
<b>°Sofia</b>	Mother	Noel	Non-binary	11-20	2	2; no
<b>∞Martin</b>	Step-Father	Alex	Fluid/MTF	21-30	5	3; yes
<b>∞Amelia</b>	Mother	Alex	Fluid/MTF	21-30	3	3; yes
<b>Savannah</b>	Mother	Aiden	FTM	1-10	9	3; yes
<b>Kelley</b>	Mother	Kayleigh	MTF	1-10	4	3; no
<b>ΔAlina</b>	Mother	Chloe	MTF-not public	1-10	2-3	3; yes
<b>ΔBen</b>	Father	Chloe	MTF-not public	1-10	2-3	3; yes
<b>Nadine</b>	Mother	Zara	MTF	1-10	2	2; yes
<b>Elizabeth</b>	Mother	Sam	Fluid/FTM	11-20	8	--

*Note:* Couples have matching symbols preceding their names; MTF = transitioning from natal male to authentic female; FTM = transitioning from natal female to authentic male; non-binary = does not identify with one gender over the other; Fluid = identifies fluidity within the spectrum of genders.

## Analysis of the Data

As I sifted through the participant interviews, journals, and my own autoethnography, I considered the experiences, opinions, and values expressed by the participants. In the personal histories of the participants, for instance, they shared their role models and “monsters” who had shaped their lives. They shared coming-of-age stories that were seared into their memories, stories that ultimately affected the development of their authentic selves. And they shared stories of trauma, particularly narratives that came back to trouble them in the early days of their child’s transition. While navigating tensions, I learned of their deepest fears, those for their child and those affecting themselves personally.

Participants related instances of acceptance and rejection from family and friends and shared their devastations and delightful surprises. As for holistic learning, I discovered (to varying degrees) how each participant gathered information, sought support, resisted help, grappled with new ideas, and tread the waves of emotion that often felt overwhelming. Ultimately, three dominant findings arose which I shared with a colleague at the university to assure inter-rater reliability. The findings highlighted in this chapter surfaced from the research questions and spoke through the values voiced by the parent participants:

- **Finding 1:** Holistic learning for parents who are reevaluating traditional Western gendered norms is supported by a balance of social support, cognitive growth, emotional reassurance, and heightened socio-cultural awareness. Tension within the learning process was often a catalyst for modifying thought patterns and adapting new behaviour;
- **Finding 2:** A parent's unresolved issues, particularly those related to trust, gender, sex, or sexual violence, can restrict a parent's ability to learn and to fully engage in supporting their child even when they are willing to do so;
- **Finding 3:** A parent's concept of authenticity, not necessarily their own gender identity development, influences their ability to support the gender transition of their child.

The remainder of this chapter will discuss these findings supported with “thick description” (Denzin, 2001, p. 99) in the form of quotations from the interviews and journal entries of the 16 participants, as well as my own autoethnographic reflections, journal entries, notes, and analyses.

I have opted to introduce each section with selections from my autoethnography to foreground each finding (Adams et al., 2014) discussed in that section. Of the participants' testimonies, mine is the most complete with a full timeline of events of my child's transgender transition, his exploration of gender fluidity, and my reactions as a parent both resisting and learning. The autoethnography is told as

a narrative, through journal entries, segments of essays written for graduate classes, and critical reflections composed during the interview process. Each section below begins with the autoethnography and each section then builds upon the one before it.

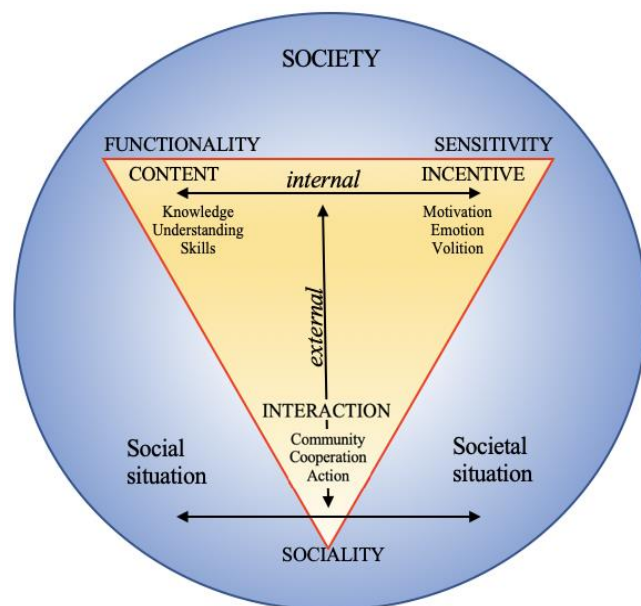
### Finding 1: The Active Domains of Holistic Learning

**Finding 1:** Holistic learning for parents who are reevaluating traditional Western gendered norms is supported by a balance of social support, cognitive growth, emotional reassurance, and heightened socio-cultural awareness. Tension within the learning process was often a catalyst for modifying thought patterns and adapting new behaviour. Illeris (2018) visualized holistic learning as the working together of the content (cognitive), incentive (affective), and interaction (social) domains

identified in the inverted triangle of Figure 6. Illeris (2018) wrote that “the triangle depicts what may be described as the tension field of learning in general and of any specific learning event or learning process as stretched out between the development of functionality, sensitivity and sociality” (p. 5). A parent, for instance, might seek meaning and understanding in the cognitive domain to increase their ability to *function* as an informed, knowledgeable parent. In the affective domain, a parent may experience a range of emotions that

**Figure 6**

*Internal and External Dimensions of Holistic Learning*



*Note.* Adapted from *How we Learn: Learning and non-learning in school and beyond* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed., p. 93), by K. Illeris, 2017. Routledge. Copyright 2017 by Knud Illeris.

ultimately motivate them to action and heighten their *sensitivity* to their needs. Within the social domain, the parent's learning becomes external through two forms of *sociality*, connections with others in society such as support groups and the process of reevaluating society as a whole. The findings showed that the tensions experienced within and across these domains were often the catalyst for shifting understandings, softening feelings, modifying thought patterns, and adapting new behaviour.

### ***Autoethnography: A web of values***

I could begin this story in a number of places, but I will begin with the year 1994. That year, as a newly married 23-year-old, I sat in on a genetics class at Brigham Young University to take notes for my husband who could not attend. I was soon engrossed by the lecture on prenatal development and disorders of sex development, such as intersex conditions. My fascination was two-fold: first, it appeared to me that God made mistakes and this was a new notion, and second, I was learning about this at a religious institution. How did the professor, who was most likely Christian, reconcile this? I concluded at the time, that our task was to love all God's children, regardless of chromosomal, gonadal, or anatomical differences. This was a value that I could depend upon later when my son transitioned.

Seventeen years later, my 13-year-old Samantha tells me she is transgender and would like to be called Sam. The following quote from his journal, used here with permission, illustrates my initial reaction to his disclosure:

*1-5-11*

*'Kay, I know this isn't the best way to begin a journal but I feel frustrated and confused. I am frustrated because I want to become more masculine and my mom doesn't completely understand. Maybe I've been hanging around Joey [pseudonym] too much, but it really does make me feel happy and good when I wear boys clothes or play sports or workout or do anything masculine. Don't ask. I have no idea why I feel this way.*

*My mom is allowing this (boy's clothes, hair REALLY short), but I can tell she really wants this to be a quick phase. Is it a phase? I can't say; I'm doing what makes me feel good about myself and happy.*

*Also, Mom's last talk with me ended with, "I want you to find out the meaning of being a woman" . . . She doesn't get it. I have nothing against women. I have girlfriends and I'm attracted to them. I just want to be a man."*

I lived near Johns Hopkins University which, at that time, diagnosed transgenderism as the psychological disorder called gender identity disorder. The website of the LGBTQ hospital across town, Chase Brexton, told me Sam was fine, that basically, he was a boy trapped in a girl's body, or at least that was how I interpreted it at the time. Instead, I needed to affirm his identity and support an alignment between his mind and body if his thoughts proved to be insistent, consistent, and persistent. This turned my thinking upside-down. I was terrified that my son had a disorder and that I had unwittingly contributed to it (through DNA or parenting); on the other hand, I feared that some people were fooling themselves into thinking that it was not a disorder, that he indeed needed psychological help, and by following them I would be playing the fool, too. This early experience triggered an emotional reaction in the affective domain of the brain (see Figure 6), as was often the case for the parents in the study.

I soon channeled these fears into an intensive search for knowledge, reading about what it meant to be transgender and the theories explaining how one could become so. At this point in my learning, I firmly straddled the cognitive and affective domains (see Figure 6), in an effort to comprehend in my head and in my heart but not sure with whom to talk. It was about this time that I met a retired nurse who allowed me to link my experience with the day I sat taking notes for my (then) husband in his genetics class. This nurse had worked for 50 years in Baltimore in the in the labour and delivery unit. Although we had just met, my thoughts reverted back to the genetics lecture and I asked her if she ever



delivered a baby in which they could not tell if it was a boy or girl. She laughed, shaking her head, and told me, “All the time.” When I asked what they did in these cases, she shrugged her shoulders, admitting they usually guessed. Sometimes they took the baby for testing. Apparently ambiguous genitalia was more common than I had thought. With Sam in mind, I deduced that perhaps a baby’s brain might develop ambiguously, too. Thus, not only do people live with sex differences, but they might live with gender differences, as well. That experience 17 years before had primed me for the novel concept of gender variation. My mind was opening, the cognitive, affective, and social domains working together synergistically.

When it was clear that Sam was sincere in his desire to transition, my most heartrending tension came from Ambiguous Loss (Boss, 1999), or the feeling that someone has died but without confirmation of having done so. I saw Sam emerging from the ashes of Samantha, but it was Samantha I mourned for. I wrote the following in an educational biography for a graduate class at the University of Calgary in 2016:

*I was experiencing denial, and I would stagger through the stages of grief (Kübler-Ross & Kessler, 2005) as I slowly but surely watched my little girl die and an imposter took her place. . . . Samantha, my girl, was gone physically and yet Samuel, the boy, sounded like her, comforting me on an emotional level. Conversely, I could speak to Samuel and be comforted that “she” was physically still there in new form, although his new concerns and interests sounded less and less like the Samantha I knew. This Dual Ambiguous Loss (Wahlig, 2014), the emotional loss and physical loss, was hard to bear. . . . What is significant to me is why it was so difficult to let go. The Samuel I know today is truly the Samantha I knew as a child—the same spirit inside, so to speak—and yet gender has such a grip on—what? Our hearts? Our minds? Our sense of reality?*

*Although Samuel was not even close to dying, I felt deeply that Samantha did. But why? What is this “love affair” we have with gender?*

For this part of my journey, I delved deep into the affective domain. Ultimately, I had the knowledge I needed to understand and I also had a support system through PFLAG Baltimore, but I did not want to let her go. But my understanding of the world had shifted, my conception of gender had changed, and after a full reconstruction of gender constructs in my mind, I realized I had found a place for Sam in it. At this point, all the domains of learning—cognitive, affective, and social—were actively working together.

Time. This element cannot be underestimated in the learning process. I needed time to reflect, to analyze what I had already learned and re-learned about gender, and to investigate the uncomfortable feelings I had when I would see people who blended gender. I wanted it not to bother me, but I had been socialized that way and had some unlearning to do. At this point in my learning, I had the information I needed, but my heart had to catch up with my head. Within Illeris’s framework of learning, the affective and social domains were active as I sat in this liminal space between what I knew and taking action on it.

In the 1990’s, I had laughed along with others watching *Saturday Night Live* as the characters tried unsuccessfully to determine Pat’s gender. At the time, we thought Pat’s androgyny was funny and I had no inkling that we were dehumanizing people like Pat. In general, I was socialized to distrust, mock, or “punish” those who crossed borders, questioned things, thought differently, made waves, or brought too much attention to themselves. Those watching *Saturday Night Live* and the characters in the scene with Pat used social cues, “gender frames” (Fisk & Ridgeway, 2018), and stereotypes as tools to solve the mystery of “its” gender, as Pat is referred to in the segment’s jingle. The humour was at the SNL characters’ failed attempts to categorize Pat and watching the segments today makes me cringe. With time, my cognitive understandings of the nature of gender, my fierce emotions of love for my child, the

social support I received from positive role models of gender expansiveness and those who supported it, I was able to reconstruct the gender constructs I have been taught. Each domain of learning worked together like the cogs in a timepiece, enabling understanding and acceptance to develop.

The following findings from the study participants follow a unique and yet similar pathway, most often initiating in the affective domain. In this section, I demonstrate how the domains of learning work separately and together during the time period of processing newer conceptions of gender. To illustrate this, I will cycle through the affective domain, cognitive domain, and social/societal domains three times, simulating the learning process most parents experienced. Certainly, this is not a linear process and the cycle I have created should not be interpreted as a universal sequence of learning tasks. Rather, I have noted that it was not uncommon for parents to experience similar questions and emotions at certain points along their journeys. For simplicity in this dissertation, I have cycled through the three domains three times highlighting common struggles at each interval and have offered illustrations to accompany each interval though, again, each parent's journey is unique despite common aspects of this journey. The first domain stimulated in this process is often the Affective Domain as a parent's understanding of gender frames has become threatened.

### ***The Affective Domain: Affective Framing***

Emotion plays a salient role in holistic learning because it is often the first step in learning. The affective domain provides the incentive to learn, the desire to realign or stabilize when one experiences disjuncture. It has been argued that emotion gets in the way of learning, which it can, but more often emotion plays a motivational role in learning. Placing emotion and cognition at two ends of a spectrum is yet another false dichotomy. In Illeris's 2007 model of learning, he places the cognitive and affective domains not at two ends of a spectrum, but as two equally important aspects of learning. The third aspect is the social/societal domain, responsible for integrating learning.

The affective domain also provides the “affective frames” (Ridgeway, 2011) through which we experience the world. Maiese (2011) expresses this as experiencing life “through emotionally contoured filters” (p. 88). In the case of parents of gender-expansive children, when a child discloses they are transgender, for instance, “bodily feelings shape the manner in which things appear to [parents] and therefore structure [their] reasoning” (Ratcliffe, 2005, p. 187). Thus, from the beginning these “gut feelings” influence how a parent directs their learning. Affective framing influences how the working memory functions, where to focus, what to reject, and how to prioritize (Maiese, 2011). The affective domain of learning is responsible for the drive to motivate a parent’s research and, more importantly, it provides the energy for the mental processes at work in the cognitive domain (Illeris, 2018). The affective domain, then, has the ability to shut down if overwhelmed, but it also propels learning when motivated to do so. In this way, the affective and cognitive domains are hinged together at the vertex of Illeris’s (2018) inverted triangle representing two dimensions of learning.

In this section, I will demonstrate the range or depth of the emotions that many of these parents experienced as it relates to learning. Parents experience deep and often painful emotions during this experience and I will share some here, but my focus here will be on how these emotions were inevitably beneficial. I will attempt to establish how the affective domain functions in learning and in transformation, whether to alleviate discomfort and tension or to incite parents to action, through learning more and reaching out to others for support.

Freda shared in her journal her own initial response as well as how differently other parents respond to their child’s disclosure. She wrote, “I probably shared the most tears in the first month. Many people amaze me that they could make the shift graciously. Others, disappointed us in their rigid, religious beliefs systems.” She later added, “Well, because the first one [group meeting] I cried a lot and . . . I’ve seen so many people like that and we also see a lot of them that are angry. They can’t access the

tears yet and the anger covers it up.” These emotions are raw and parents emote, suppress, redirect, or begin processing them. Freda continued, “I find it helpful to get up and write down all the things that are causing me to stay awake, then it is sometimes easier to fall back into bed emotionally spent from telling the story on paper, and fall asleep. This past week I found the journal from that time period. It is filled with raw emotion.” Telling the story was often the first step in processing distressing emotions.

In Dawn’s case, she experienced a sense of instability in her world to the point that she feared that her husband Adam, too, would change. She said, “And something that’s really weird, I should share it with you. It’s really weird. When Ava came out and I’m going through all this grief and stuff, I looked at Adam, ‘You’re not going to change gender, are you? You’re still a guy.’ I never said that to him. Never, never, never, but in my mind it’s, ‘You’re still a guy.’” She deeply feared instability and confessed that “I just went through this crazy phase of, ‘Please don’t change anything else. Do not rock my world anymore and thank God, you’re still a guy.’ Then for myself, I used to have a short bob. I started growing my hair out longer. It was like here and then now it’s longer. Anyway, I felt like my whole identity was threatened. My own identity, ‘Wait a minute, do I need to look more feminine here?’ It was the weirdest, strangest thing.” In this quote you can see Dawn beginning to work through her emotions framed by her past experiences, raised in an unstable family environment with an abusive father and surrounded by traditional social gender norms. The question, “Wait a minute, do I need to look feminine here?” signalled a change in Dawn, however. At this point, she considers the question, “What makes a woman?” and the gender constructs she had been resorting to to affirm gender, such as her hair length. Dawn begins her journey with affective framing centered on stability and her motivation to re-stabilize her family. The concepts of gender framing and stability will both become central concepts to Dawn’s newer understandings of gender as it relates to transition.

Processing new ideas, particularly when they clash with earlier conceptions you hold, can have an emotional toll, as well. Amelia also considers the question, what makes a woman? in her journal: “What makes a woman? Is it having breasts, a vagina, a uterus? I think having breasts, a vagina, a uterus are what have led me to identify as a woman, almost as if I had no choice. And really, until I began thinking about and discussing gender and identity, I never questioned whether having those physical attributes are what make a woman. But what of my friends and family who’ve had mastectomies? Are they not women? Or people like myself who’ve had hysterectomies? Are we not women?” Like Dawn, her emotions and cognition have led her to consider the very premise of gender transition—what is gender anyway?

### ***The Cognitive Domain: Making Meaning***

Working in tandem with a stimulated affective domain, the cognitive domain often goes into high gear as the gatherer re-evaluates old beliefs, analyzes misinformation, compares old socio-cultural norms to newer socio-cultural concepts, and attempts to update a worldview that has worked for them up until this moment. The cognitive domain allows the parent to make sense of the world, to restore balance through understanding, and to comprehend more fully what their child is going through so they can be the support system they need.

It was not uncommon for the parents in this study to anxiously search for information from the internet, friends, and support groups as this unknown situation descended upon them. Parents of younger children are suddenly placed in the position to make decisions on behalf of the child, decisions such as permitting public transition, decisions that could have long-lasting psychological effects if made rashly, and ones for which they will be ultimately held responsible. Parents of teens are in a similar position and yet their child is often well ahead of them, having done the research themselves online and entreating them for permission to begin hormone treatment straightaway. Parents of adult children who live away

from home are relieved of the burden of making decisions on behalf of their child, but they often only see their child periodically and each time they do, they have transitioned, not gradually as the younger ones, but enough to shock, such that parents are often playing catch-up. In each of these cases, the search for information is a concerted effort to understand this new concept, reduce feelings of discomfort when these newer conceptions of gender conflict with traditional Western notions of gender, and to regain a sense of control in a situation that may feel unbalanced.

Kelley, who had a 4-year-old transgender child at the time of transition, began information-gathering by reading medical reports. She said, “I became obsessed with clinical studies . . . I had post-it notes and these big papers. My whole wall was full of research.” Savannah, who had a three-year-old, originally recognized her child’s gender dysphoria through television. She commented, “I was watching Katie Couric one day. . . . It was about the episode with the twins that were so young, and one of them was transgender. For me, just learning about that, it was a big aha moment for me. As soon as I, it was like it clicked for me. Like, that’s exactly what Aiden was. I went and started researching it more and finding out more information.” Eventually, after reading through what was available, she was confident enough to share what she had learned with Aiden and to offer him hope. This experience was nine years ago and Aiden continues to live his authentic self with the support of his family.

In her journal, Nadine writes about her vast quest for knowledge when her daughter, Zara, was four. She wrote, “It led me to find our support group, read up on trans children/youth, pay more attention to trans issues in the world and become better understanding of gender identity, gender expression, and sex as well as how they do and don’t relate. I also became better acquainted with medical issues which means I am now aware that transition is hugely personal and varies individually. I am better aware of ‘trans etiquette’ so I’m now less likely to accidentally offend or harm a trans person.” She even went a step further and read what transgender people wrote on Tumblr to gain a better understanding of their

points-of-view. She wrote, “I think reading what actual trans people have to say (particularly about how their own parents interacted with them) on Tumblr prior to Zara expressing herself inoculated me against some of the harmful mistakes parents can make.” Nadine sought to understand Zara’s world through the literature in psychology and medicine, and also on a personal level through Tumblr.

Likewise, Amelia, was in the midst of researching what it meant to be transgender and gender fluid. Three years before, her child related to her that they were gender fluid but for Amelia who lived in at a distance from her child, this was not upsetting. Later, she admitted that she thought gender fluid meant bisexual and that did not bother her. Three months before I began interviewing Amelia, however, her child called to tell her that she planned to transition completely to female. When asked what was the most challenging part of her experience, Amelia responded:

The ambiguity . . . . Ambiguity is just not a place for most of us, me included. . . . I've gone and read and joined support groups and so on. It feels much more substantive. I think one of the reasons is, when I look back on it, I think it's because I confused being bisexual with being fluid. Sexuality and gender were getting confused again. Part of my process is beginning to learn the difference between the two. That it wasn't just another step of bisexuality, I didn't get it . . . I am learning through my study of what it means to be trans and what it means to be the parent of somebody who may be transitioning. I'm doing all this reading and looking online and talking to you and support groups, that's how I've learned it. Honest to God, two months ago, I didn't know there was a difference between gender and sexuality, not in the way I could have articulated that for you.

Amelia was also working through misinformation and correcting misunderstandings she had of gender identity development and sexuality.

### ***The Social/Societal Domain: Isolation and Supports***



While the cognitive and affective domains are internal processes within the parent, the social or socio-cultural domain is where a parent learns through listening to or watching others. According to Illeris's (2018) domains of holistic learning, this domain is the site of interaction and integration, where minds and heart come together to communicate and interact. The social/societal domain, like the affective and cognitive domains, works with the other domains to foster learning and understanding.

Support groups ultimately offered information, emotional support, and a forum where parents could find others in a similar situation. Many had well-meaning friends who were supportive but “didn’t get it,” as Kelley phrased it. “I was trying to network and trying to connect Kayleigh with people that are just like her. Somewhere where she’s not a ‘freak.’ Where there’s nothing wrong with her.” Kelley later discovered a number of support groups online for parents of gender expansive children around the world. Dawn, too, discovered that support groups were a place where she could express her innermost thoughts. She admitted, “I don’t say that to [Ava], that stays inside here [points to forehead] or it can come out at our support meetings when we talk with other parents. We say these things that we absolutely cannot say in front of our transgender children. I think I’m over that part, but and I’m accepting that this is who she is. Recently, she’s been really appreciative of all the efforts that I’ve made to educate myself right away up front, go and read, and go to these meetings.” These meetings are a place where shared fears, doubts, anger, frustration, shame, and other harbored emotions can surface safely and worked through with others who are further ahead in the journey.

When Gloria’s son, Xavier, scheduled his hysterectomy, she was concerned. She said, “I remember being concerned that Xavier had a hysterectomy scheduled and had not even got to the top of the list to get in to see [the doctor] yet, and I’m like, ‘Here you are going and eliminating the option to ever give birth and you haven’t even seen the psychologist who’s the expert . . . for it.’ Just other parents to give suggestions and just say, ‘Well, maybe you could do this or what about this?’ It just made you

feel like you're not so alone.” Kendra chuckled at the memory of the parents who went to her support group who seemed to travel together through their children’s transitions. She said, “It’s interesting this time too because we’re going through it all as a group in a way. When there’s a closed group of people, 12 people maybe . . . we’ve built these friendships altogether. . . . We were joking because [the support group leader] got custody of us!” Many of those in the support group shared how they relied on one another for information, experience, support, and even friendship.

### ***The Affective Domain: Loss and Ambiguous Loss***

Ambiguous loss in the case of parents of gender expansive children is the sense that your child has “died” and yet continues to live. The ambiguity lies in what has been lost and what remains. While a sense of loss was felt by most parents in the study, the intense grief associated with ambiguous loss tended to be felt by parents of older or adult children. Again, a parent’s painful journey through ambiguous loss appeared to be a significant part of their learning and as a largely emotional experience that requires time to heal.

Dawn, for instance, mentioned her discovery that having a “son” was an important part of her self-identity. She said, “Because I did not grow up in a loving family, I made sure that I hugged my kids at the very least twice a day, when they woke up and when they went to bed. Whenever Ava would wake up and come upstairs or whatever, I’d give her a hug and I’d say, ‘Good morning, my son.’ I don’t know why that was important to me, but it was important to me, that ‘my son’ part.” This loss extended to her fear that she did not know her child as much as she thought she did. She said, “One of the things that really shook my foundation was, I cannot say that anymore. I don’t have a son. I think it was the loss of a son, it wasn’t the loss of Ava because like you said, Ava is clearly there. Ava reassured me when she came back, after that two-week mark, that she wasn’t going anywhere, she was always going to be in my life. I also felt like, ‘Now she’s going to go off and—’ I don’t know what I thought, to pursue her life in a

different space because we're not the same as her anymore? Why would she hang around with us?" In this quote, Dawn demonstrates the ambiguity of her loss, that her child had not only left but would begin a new life without her.

Adam, Ava's father, recognized that he too cherished the role of father-and-son. He described his changing expectations in the following conversation:

Adam: Oh, yes. I felt an experience of loss and, yes, my plans for him, not that I realized I had plans for him, but they were they were destroyed. One of the things that Ava told me that helped was she just said, 'You know Dad, I'm the same person. I'm the same person now as I was before.' It may have been in reference to what I understand about transgender but it helped. Now with that when we're sitting here doing something alone, I'd start calling her Liam because I'm not thinking of what I should be calling her or even could call her. I'm just doing something with Liam. Stuff that we had done before and whatever it is.

Elizabeth: You slip back into that comfort zone?

Adam: The relationship we had.

Elizabeth: Normalcy.

Adam: Yes. Can I say, I don't know. The learned response what are we calling that when you do something repetitively, muscle memory.

Elizabeth: Yes. Muscle memory.

Adam: This is like that only in your head. [chuckles]

Adam, in many ways, has worked through ambiguous loss in that he no longer has gendered expectations for his child, but when spending time with Ava and regaining the old comfort of their relationship, he will slip into using male pronouns. His discomfort with having "lost" his son propelled

him to learn that the essence of his child still existed, and yet he is still in the process of adopting the new name and pronouns his daughter brings.

Gloria shared a similar experience but due to unique circumstances she avoided prolonged ambiguous loss. She explains, “Early on, you think, ‘Jessica is no more and Xavier is who it will be.’ I think that quickly rectified itself in that I had a cousin and I had a friend both of whom had lost their young adult children. I’m like, ‘That puts it in perspective.’ One died of a heart condition about age 27 and the other committed suicide at age 22. Both of those made me realize, Xavier is right here . . . Xavier is still living in my house and is still a thoughtful, considerate, bright, young person that he was before. If I felt a sense of mourning or loss, because I’ve lost my daughter, it just felt very, I don’t know, selfish of me to think that there’s far greater loss that could’ve happened in life, so I’m blessed that my child is still with me and on this earth.” The tragic loss of two young adults close to Gloria taught her a powerful lesson about loss that arguably saved her from the emotional agony other parents, such as Dawn, worked through. Remy, whose child is non-binary, also recognized that the essence of his child lay within: “I have to accept that I lost that kid and still looking at an old picture, I think it’s not a good thing to do. It’s still evolving literally, so there is a loss. At the same time, there is that human being that is inside and it’s the same human being. But there is a loss, it’s true.” Both Gloria and Remy demonstrated their motivation to resolve their feelings of ambiguous loss because their children were very much still alive and well and with them.

Freda felt she needed a son to help her heal from the sexual abuse of her past. In her response, she shares both her initial feelings and what she has learned from them: “I felt like I lost that son that I needed. I loved my son and I was still able to keep the essence of that child, but that child was no longer a son but was a daughter . . . . But I did, I did, I certainly experienced grief.” Freda began processing this grief through her dreams. In one of her astonishing dreams, she recounted, “I was in my parent’s home.

It was in the house that I grew up as a child and I can remember the purple walls and the green carpet and I had a baby and I held that baby and I snuggled that baby and I had that baby in my arms and I fell asleep and when I woke up the baby was gone and I went looking for the baby and nobody would acknowledge that there had been a baby.” At this point in the interview, Freda was tearful and I asked her how she interpreted the dream. She replied, “It took a long time for me to puzzle out but I think that was the grief of losing Jonathan,” and yet it was through time that Freda learned that Ivory and Jonathan were of the same essence. She concluded that “The losses that I felt before, I think, have been more than compensated for her being her authentic self and being loved for being her authentic self.” This emotional experience motivated Freda to comprehend the concept of authentic gender and gender congruence.

Amelia’s case was intriguing in that she did not experience ambiguous loss when her child identified as gender fluid, but she felt great anxiety at the “loss” of Alex when he discussed transition to Sophie. In the former case, she felt she still had a piece of her son to hold onto.

Elizabeth: Did you experience feelings of loss since you're dealing with a gender-fluid child?

Amelia: I didn't feel it with the fluid at all.

Elizabeth: No?

Amelia: No. Didn't even occur to me to feel a loss. It's when Alex's going to go away altogether. That's I think when I felt loss. I think that's what the loss is that Alex was going to go away and Sophie was going to show up and I'd never met her and I didn't know who she was. She was taking over and he was going to go.

Amelia sees Sophie as separate, or alien, to Alex, and there is a sense of uneasiness that Sophie is usurping her son’s body. Amelia will eventually discover that much of her resistance to Sophie is due to her long-held stereotype of women as “girly girls,” as will be discussed in the section on stereotypes,

below. Once she was able to internalize that gender falls along a spectrum, she was able to see Sophie and Alex as two sides of the same coin. This experience challenged her socio-cultural understandings of gender identity, an aspect of the social/societal domain of learning. Later, when asked whether she was still feeling a sense of loss, she responded, “When I hear him on the phone, he’s still exactly the same except for the fact that he seems happy and more communicative, which is an ambiguous gain, not loss.” It could be said that many of these parents experienced ambiguous gain after working through ambiguities of their loss.

### ***The Cognitive Domain: Stereotypes, the Trojan Horse***

Amelia experienced an epiphany during an interview with her and her husband. Although she had read much, she admitted that she was afraid that the female side of her gender fluid child would not like or accept her. Her epiphany came when her husband and I were discussing stereotypes of transgender females. She said, “You know, this last few minutes of conversation between the two of you, I realized what it is about Alex. I am not a girly girl and if Alex becomes a girly girl, I don’t know where to connect with her. One of my experiences in college was [that] I always hung out with the guys because we talked politics and economics and the women, the girls I knew in college were all about talking about boys and nail polish and stuff that I was not into so I have never been a girly girl... So, in my brain I say, ‘Well, Alex will still be in there and he’ll still be reading Plato but that won’t be Sophie. That will be Alex inside Sophie. You see, I can’t quite wrap my head around it.’” When I suggested that she might be making a stereotype out of her daughter, she grabbed my arm and exclaimed, “That’s it. That’s what I was afraid of. I’m afraid she’s going to become a woman I can’t connect to.” Once the stereotype was identified, she was able to challenge it. In an email, she later wrote, “Oh wow. . . I realized something, a big ah ha. The reason I haven’t been able to write about girly girls is because that is not the issue. That is not the question. The question is: What makes a woman? As soon as I realized

that, I could write. And I am. Far out, eh? :)” Through conversation and by scrutinizing unexamined gender frames Amelia unconsciously adopted by virtue of living in a gendered society, she was able to identify the stereotype that triggered fear within her and shift her attention to the bigger issue: What makes a woman?

It is not uncommon for people to resort to stereotypes when socio-cultural norms are challenged (Ridgeway, 2018; Ryan, 2016). This period of growth involves the cognitive domain and the social domain, as stereotypes are overcome by challenging them intellectually or by having role models too. Dawn learned to challenge concealed stereotypes. When asked if she had noticed physical changes in her daughter, she said, “Well, up front, yes because up front, it's like okay, well, this was Ava or Liam and then now we've got a different hairstyle which to me still doesn't look female. Then I really quickly went, ‘Wait a minute, it can be anything it doesn't have to be that traditional thing.’ Right away, I adopted that very early on . . . . I saw the stereotype and I went, ‘Wait a minute, there is no like, you can have a bald head and be female, that's just an outward appearance thing, it's got nothing to do with your gender.’” Her husband, Adam, also learned to challenge stereotypes as his only frames of reference for transgender people were stereotypes from the social media. He said, “How does that change me? Well, obviously, it's educated me about transgender people. I'm a little bit more knowledgeable. I don't have the stereotype that is presented on TV, fiction movies or series. It's given me, probably more respect for the transgender body.” Adam had worried that Liam would change during transition, change enough to become like the images he saw on TV, and that eventually Liam would no longer be interested in his family, but through his information-gathering and communication with Liam, he learned that Liam's personality would remain intact.

### ***The Social/Societal Domain: Role models***

Role modelling is another aspect of attending support groups as newer attendees look to experienced parents and the support group leader for direction. Meeting gender expansive people also made a difference, and I will share examples of the comfort meeting fully transitioned gender expansive people in the Findings section on Authenticity. Role models often triggered thought processes or provided comfort for parents. For this section, I will share Amelia and Martin's experience of meeting genderqueer artist and scholar Vivek Shraya who allowed them to appreciate their own gender fluid child who lives in the U.S. The night after meeting Shraya, Amelia wrote in her journal, "I work in tears, needing to write, and instead got sucked into Vivek's website. But I will write. There is so much there. Oh and btw: As Martin and I were leaving, Vivek was there, also leaving, and I was able to speak to her, thank her, tell her that more than anything she left me feeling so very, very proud of our son. I love him for questioning, for exploring, for being who he and she is. And I will learn to surf on my tears. There is enough energy there to carry me a long way." Role models allowed participants to see what the future could look like for their child or for them as the supportive parent.

### ***The Affective Domain: New Frames of Gender***

Since many parents have been raised in a society that has traditionally reinforced gender roles and its presentation, it is not surprising when they initially feel uncomfortable when their child challenges these norms. In many ways, "trusting your gut" or going with what "feels right" might not be the wisest course of action if the socio-cultural norms themselves are too rigid. Anything that does not align with traditional gendered expectations might "feel wrong" to someone who has not examined the gender frames (Fisk & Ridgeway, 2018) that unconsciously play in the background of our minds. Having said this, most parents in this study spent some time analyzing gendered expectations and prescribed roles because their child challenged them. Of this experience, Ben said, "It does also seem very right. It seems to fit into place. Probably an outside person who isn't studying gender rules and



everything would be, ‘Oh, that’s weird or not right or not natural or anything.’ But here with Cameron, it seems right. It seems about right.”

Freda expressed what many parents initially feared when she said, “I think before I was more concerned about what others thought. I was more concerned about how I was perceived. Now I don’t care. You can construe whatever story you need to construe, I know that I love my child and my child loves me and the rest doesn’t matter.” She takes it one step further when she extends her thoughts to religion. She said, “Jesus reached out to the marginalized and we’re supposed to be doing—if we’re supposed to be following in his footsteps—we’re supposed to be reaching out to the marginalized, not creating the marginalized.” In this way, she challenged the conventional responses of many Christian religions today who reject gender expansive people. It feels right, in other words, to see them as regular people, not as an ostracized few. When developing new frames of gender, a parent challenges their own understandings, their reactions and feelings, and the socio-cultural norms in the society around them.

Amelia spoke of “reframing gender” when she discussed the challenges of having a gender fluid child. She, herself, appreciates being challenged intellectually and her response to seeing a photograph of Vivek Shraya, who blended traditional gendered style codes, demonstrated her openness to expanding her understanding. She said, “That picture was so brain-shaking for me, and I like that. I think getting shaken up is a good thing.” She later commented that the ambiguity of being neither man nor woman, or both, is unsettling for most, but she was able to reframe her conception of non-binary people by seeing them as both or neither, not as undecided. She commented, “Ambiguity is just not a place for most of us, me included. I’d like to believe I won’t feel it’s ambiguous if our child decides, ‘I am both.’ That’s a choice, it’s no longer ambiguous, it’s both. It doesn’t feel ambiguous to me. It’s not, ‘Well, I can’t decide if I’m both or if I’m one.’ That is ambiguous, and it would drive me crazy, but if there’s a decision made now that I’m going to be both, that doesn’t feel like ambiguity to me.” She then shared an analogy that

suggested the subtle difference she felt when interacting with her gender fluid child. She said when she is with her cousins in Europe, “sometimes I’m speaking French, sometimes I’m speaking German, sometimes I’m speaking English, and the person who I am when I speak French isn’t quite who I am when I speak English.” She then compares this nuanced shift to her interactions with her child: “Then I just say, ‘Who are you today?’ Then, I’ll speak to that person.” By reframing gender, Amelia was able to expand her understanding of gender identity to accommodate genders outside the binary.

### ***The Cognitive Domain: Reconstruction***

For many of my participants, their child’s transition was (and is) a time of cognitive dissonance, epiphanies, cognitive shifts, and new understandings. Amelia shared her shift in understanding gender when she said, “It’s not a spectrum, it’s a web.” Similarly, Ben commented, “I think Alina’s little analogy was pretty good. . . . She was saying she thinks that [gender is like a] pool, on one side there is the roughest toughest boys that you can possibly be, on the other side the girliest girl you can possibly be and all this in the middle is kind of a little bit of everything.” Adam’s understanding came when he appreciated the difference between gender and sex: “Now that I understand it, the pieces of the puzzle are fitting together. Sex is between your legs and gender is between your ears.” These simple yet powerful metaphors and visuals allowed these participants to shift understandings.

On a deeper level, Kendra appreciated that her trans daughter was not “choosing” to be female. At first, when considering her child’s declaration to transition from boy to girl, she thought, “What the fuck’s wrong with you? Like, you’ve got reserved a more privileged place. Why would you want to take that step back? To me, that was part of it. You’re going to get less money, you’re going to deal with a whole bunch of abuse that you could just as easily avoid by projecting your manliness [chuckles] . . . . There was a lot of feeling like it was a choice and just outside of the privilege, . . . that choice that you’re making is putting you in a more vulnerable spot. . . . Then I realized that had nothing to do with what

she was choosing. She wasn't choosing it in any way like that. She was choosing to express what she felt rather than what society wanted. What I was seeing was more of what society wanted or society's views of it.” Kendra’s epiphany allowed her to better understand that her daughter’s choice was to socially transition, not to be transgender. Being transgender was part of her authentic self.

I had the privilege of witnessing one of Amelia’s epiphanies, above, as she recognized she was relying on stereotypes of women to define them. After typing in her journal, she emailed this thought: “In discussion with Martin after writing this, I realize all my thoughts were about the societal roles expected from each gender. I didn’t even comment about how binary gender was for me, and it certainly was . . . . As I write, I see how entangled gender and relationships are for me. And gender and social roles.” This point of the journey is key—untangling the definitions of gender, gender roles, sex, and sexuality. When I later asked Amelia to write about her “girly girl” discovery and she dug deeper to find that her outdated definition of womanhood was at the heart of the difficulty. Not only this, but it was about how she never felt she fit into the stereotype of a woman, but was an outlier or an exception to the definition as she presumed she was more political or scientific than the average woman. Her fear of connecting with her “new daughter” was based on her limited definition of what it meant to be a woman, a definition that in many ways excluded even herself.

Alina shared how her understanding of gender began to clarify when comparing the transgender spectrum to other spectrums in nature. She said, “I honestly can't remember when my ideas started changing. Even before—I was quite interested in the whole thing. I brought the [LGBTQ support centre], kind of a tour education day, to . . . our [place of work]. I think before then, I definitely started thinking it was a continuum because I was sort of thinking that a lot more things are a continuum that I realized. Autism is on a continuum. We're all probably on that continuum somewhere from very few of us having none of those autistic behaviors to the most.” Her husband, Ben, shared that he learned how

complicated gender was with its shades of grey and there was no need to shut down because of it. He explained he was a “little more educated. The more I'm educated, the more I know I don't know much about anything. It's not black and white, it's not just guys dressing like girls, it's not that. It's a lot more involved and I don't understand but that's okay, I kind of get that I don't understand. I don't just shut down.” This couple worked together to challenge misunderstandings and build new ones in its place.

Adam makes an interesting observation about learning and unlearning. He said, “. . . my lack of experience from my past has impeded my ability to parent a transgender child, but I feel fortunate I suffer from lack of experience rather than incorrect experience because it places me in a position where I am learning things instead of unlearning things about transgender children.” Adam felt his nurturing, open-minded upbringing, unlike the critical, religious upbringing of his wife, left him in a position to be open to new concepts, in a tabula rasa state. He did not feel he had to unlearn as much as those who had been raised to judge LGBTQ people negatively. Thus, Adam tweaked his conceptions of gender whereas others may have needed to tear down a belief system completely before rebuilding.

Nadine, took reconstruction to next level. In her journal, she wrote, “And I would like to see a further shift in my brain away from thinking of Emma as my daughter and Zara as my trans daughter. I want to, even on an unconscious level, stop letting my brain categorize Emma in certain ways because she happens to be a cis girl. And I want to stop thinking that Zara is different and will have different needs and experiences and though she may choose to be proudly vocal in embracing that trans aspect of her identity someday, I want my brain to forget it when it's not important.” In this case, Nadine is consciously reconstructing her brain, aware of gender complexity and yet her thought patterns have yet to become internalized.

### ***The Social/Societal Domain: Challenging the Status Quo***

It is one thing to share in a support group, but for many participants, telling others was, at first, a terrifying thought. As parents grew in understanding and confidence in their ability to parent a gender expansive child, this began to change. Instead, parents shared a sense of pride in their child and a need to advocate on their behalf. Savannah became comfortable enough to share her experiences with others at work: “What I’ve found is when I do open up and tell that story, it opens up the conversation from them [at work] too. People have come out at work. One girl came out as lesbian after talking to me. She said I felt comfortable coming out as lesbian because of your story. Another lady, she came out as bi and she said her daughter was gay and she’s never told anyone that.” Eventually, Savannah became the go-to person when people had questions or clients who were gender expansive. She continued, “I’ve had one girl come to me, actually, to talk about her little five-year-old. . . . After hearing me talk about it and hearing my story, she was like, ‘I want to hear more about that because I feel like my son might be transgender.’ Being able to give a little bit of advice and support, that’s nice. . . . the staff come to me.” Savannah represents the positive experiences parents can have when sharing with others that their child is gender expansive. In her case, she was able to open up conversations that allowed others to open up, as well.

Having been raised in a communist country, Sofia witnessed her mother work for an underground newspaper that subverted the ideology of her country until she was caught and black-listed from employment. Still, she took in her gay and lesbian friends and maintained friendships with them despite the legal consequences. Sofia’s husband, Remy, whom she met after leaving the country, spent his young adult years as a punk rocker. He explains that “the political ideas at that time, it was in the songs and things like that. I was really on the left. I was not communist but . . . I didn’t really think thoughtfully about things like that. It was more rebellion against society.” Remy and Sofia were now again battling society in choosing to support their non-binary child. Remy said, “There are things in life

that you decide and things that you don't decide and you cannot be made responsible of what you don't decide because it's like that. It's just like that. There is no right or wrong, it's just like that.” Sofia shared how she was more alert and how she “put on my wall, the symbols, the flag, the safe space. Do you know? More militant. If you need me, I am here.” Although they are both still learning what it means to be non-binary and navigate society as non-binary, they are firm advocates with their child as they challenge the status quo.

Amelia said, “I find myself educating friends in the limited amount that I'm able to do because most people I know haven't run into this. I'm able to share what I've learned. It's not even what I have learned, what I am learning. I always have to preface it. This is just what I've read today so I might be different tomorrow. I feel I've changed. Yes, absolutely, and it's for the better. I feel I know more.” Amelia is just one of many of the parents who overcame their fears to be in a place where they felt comfortable sharing what they had learned and advocating publicly on their child's behalf.

## **Finding 2: Personal History—Unhooking the Claws of the Past**

Finding 2: A parent's unresolved issues, particularly those related to trust, gender, sex, or sexual violence, can present a barrier to a parent's learning and restrict their ability to fully engage in supporting their child even when they are willing to do so.

The parents in this study were solicited through two support groups and they were all supportive of their children. However, this does not mean that some parents did not have to work through issues, privately or publicly, during this learning experience. The findings in this section explore past experiences, emotions, or cognitive blocks, that held parents back even when they wanted to be the fully supportive parent.

### ***Autoethnography: Unresolved Issues***

I discovered, much to my surprise, that it was my own (mis)conceptions of womanhood that retarded my ability to support my child when he needed me. My definitions of man and woman simply could not accommodate my son, Sam's, experience. My struggle lay in the area of identity, the definition of womanhood and what it meant to be a woman. Having been raised in a traditional Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saint (LDS) religion during the feminist 70s era, conflict had unceasingly festered within me through the years as the values engendered within me during my upbringing riled against the empowering voices of feminists and a new world of opportunity and respect for women.

A quiet, smoldering anger burned within me that I did not truly understand until 2016 while writing an educational biography for a graduate class. When considering this biography, my mind kept turning to my own frustrations with gender through the years. I have included a portion of the biography below:

*Throughout all of my son's transgender transition and the two years of leading support groups, I never once self-analyzed why gender transition was such a painful experience for me . . . I didn't realize this exploration would take me through multiple transformative moments in my life, like peeling back layers of an onion, tears and all.*

In the 1970s, I sang Helen Reddy's, "I am Woman, Hear Me Roar" and heralded Billie Jean King for whipping Bobby Riggs in the Battle of the Sexes. I was the first of two girls to take "shop" or industrial education in 1983-4. But as the Women's Right Movement played in the background through television, music, and magazines, my parents had joined the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS) or the Mormons, and I was encouraged to develop into a "virtuous young women," to raise children and experience the "joy of womanhood." I served a mission in Japan from 1991-1992 and according to the rules of the time, young men were expected to serve a mission for the church at age 19 but women had the option at 21. I chose to go and my experience there fomented my growing frustration

with the patriarchy as leadership roles could only be filled by men, regardless of experience or ability. Upon returning to university, I grew frustrated with school as I knew it would all be for naught. I was almost 23 and most of my LDS friends were married.

In 1997, a young mother of two, my bishop asked for a kiss good-bye when my husband transferred. I expected a fatherly peck on the cheek but he took my lips and I was ashamed. This was but one inappropriate act of many I had experienced from older men, but the fact that he was my bishop, a person whom I had trusted, it seemed all the more egregious. I left the church in 1999 when Sam was two and I was then free to be the woman I wanted to be. I returned to school and grew in confidence. For the first time in my life, I was content being a woman.

When Sam told me he was not a girl, it triggered this old painful journey with gender. I wrote a poem called Invisible that demonstrated my conflicted, evolving, and constantly challenged experience with gender throughout my life, but I will include only the tail-end here. His tender words threatened me. I had laid that conversation to rest. But the unconscious feelings that arose for Sam, were undeniable. I was angry.

When my daughter  
Tells me  
She is not a girl inside,  
But a boy.  
A man,  
Born with invincibility in his DNA,  
The invincibility you need not fight for.  
Invincibility that is not earned.  
And I see my child



A traitor.

I later wrote about these layers of onion skin peeling back in an essay on gender and transgenderism. Referring to Heyes's (2003) article, "Feminist solidarity after queer theory: The case of transgender," Nagoshi & Brzuzy (2010) construed that essentialist feminists saw "female-to-male (FTM) transgenders [as] betrayers of their oppressed identities, while male-to-female (MTF) transgenders, who had relinquished male privilege, still would not be considered 'real' women" (p. 435). In many ways, I saw my child through the eyes of an essential feminist. Indeed, I felt betrayed. I had given Sam so much more freedom than I had ever experienced. I had taught both my children about the limitless power and potential of the modern woman only to have it rejected by my second child. But Sam was in earnest; he wanted to transition now. I let my anger simmer until another day but this blockage in the affective domain delayed my learning in the early stages and then again in his gender fluid exploration which I will discuss in the next finding section.

When I wrote the educational biographical on my gender education, I discovered that my anger was linked to my conflicting sense of what it meant to be a "woman," and was once again able to update my definition of womanhood. By now, I comprehended the concept of the gender spectrum and I realized there was nothing to be angry about anymore. I was then able to let go. Through the interviews and journal entries, I discovered that a few parents shared this aspect of the journey with me. Most parents had to rethink gender and what it meant to them, but my frustration had grown out of abuse of power. Gloria and Kendra voiced similar concerns about the power dynamics of gender, as discussed in the section below. These were the claws of the past that held on to me. The findings in the following section are the triggers, traumas, and emotional black holes of many of the participants and how they dealt with them. 2

### ***Black Holes***

Freda suggested that “black holes” from the past impeded learning. She explained, “Black holes are when there’s, like, if you’ve not healed your issues, there are some places that you just can’t go and it’s like you fall into them and nobody can reach you and you feel lost and you don’t know why you’re lost. You react in ways you don’t understand . . . It’s just an emotional black hole that—it just raises fear and you just can’t go there. You’ve got some healing to do first.” Freda had spent time with a counselor, years before her transgender daughter came out to her, working through issues of incest. She said, “Whenever there was a problem, it was always my fault, and now it’s not my fault. Whereas if I hadn’t gone for that counseling, and then when Ivory would have come out to me, it would have been my fault.” Thus, when her child came out to her, she was not sucked into a black hole, like some of the other parents. Instead, she said, “I remember it very vividly. Most of us do. [laughs] She was 19 and her words to me were, Mum, if I could take a pill tonight and wake up tomorrow and be a girl I would be the happiest girl on the face of the earth. And I went into counsellor mode and I said, I had no idea. Can you tell me more? I’m so grateful for counsellor mode. Because I didn’t say something stupid. And I didn’t shut her down.” Because of Freda’s personal counseling and her “counsellor mode,” she was able to fully attend to her daughter’s needs without being clouded by her own.

Kendra had also been molested by her father as a child and went to counseling to work through her issues years before her child came out to her as transgender. She said, “Counseling taught me more about me and about my responsibility versus other people’s responsibility.” This echoes Freda’s realization that not everything was her fault. Kendra was, however, triggered when her daughter first came out to her and she was asked to keep it secret from her husband until he returned home. Kendra confided, “I see this now in hindsight . . . [when] she came out to me, it was on Thursday morning and [Mike] was away and he came home Friday night and I struggled with keeping the secret and I knew because it put me back feeling like I did when I was a kid keeping the secret of abuse, so that was a huge

piece for me. . . . For me, keeping the secret put me back into the abuse and incest in my family.”

Kendra also shared an experience of when she was momentarily overwhelmed by fear. She said, “It was just like when you're quiet and then something comes deep from within your subconscious about what you believe. I was away, I was by myself on a beach and all of a sudden I just got this washed-over panic attack about, oh my God, are these defective genes that I passed from my father?” Kendra, for the most part, had healed enough to be safe from the tug of this black hole, but her deep-seated fear still held power on her if only for a moment. About this concern, she explains, “It's not resolved but again, I think—I don't know that we're to resolve everything. I'm not tormented by it. I don't struggle with it. If I get more information, I'll put that into the equation. We're not supposed to know everything. Right?” Like Freda, she was able to separate her experience from her child's experience, to continue her learning journey, and be present for her child.

One of Alina's fears stemmed from an experience she had with her elder child. As Alina shared her story of her daughter who had had an eating disorder, she teared up when speaking to me about having not made the right decisions as a parent. When asked why she was teary, she replied, “It's just an emotional subject, you know. Just hurting your kids or not making the right decisions and—” When asked if she felt like her daughter's eating disorder was her fault, she admitted that she did feel it was and felt she had failed her. She said, “I did a hands-off thing . . . I was afraid I would just alienate her or push her more in that direction. I had no idea what to do. At first, she didn't say much, but then later, she's like, “I think if you'd said something I would have stopped.” Then when her daughter started cutting, Alina said, “I'm like, ‘Man I screwed that one up.’ It's always a guessing game. One thing I think I learned from that is, don't let fear stop you from doing your stuff. You may still make mistakes but don't let it come from fear because I was afraid to talk to her about it.” Alina recognized that fear of doing the wrong thing or failing to do anything still had a hold on her. For any parent, the thought of

making decisions regarding gender, hormones, surgery, etc. weighs heavy on one's conscience, but in Alina's case where she fears making mistakes with her transgender child, her fear, represented by the affective domain as well as the cognitive domain, could be a barrier to action. She said, "I think my biggest fear around all of that is if I could see in a crystal ball that when he's 20 and 30 and 40 he still sees himself the same way. . . It scares me because then what if 10 years from now he changes his mind or she changes her mind, and at that's, but I guess we'll come to that. I don't have to worry about that quite yet but that is one of those things that looms over me." In this case, Alina's potential learning barrier is fear that leads to indecision, but she continues to work through this knowing she is not perfect.

Alina's husband, Ben, also shared a fear. After a divorce, his ex-wife moved out of the province with his step-children with whom he had co-parented. This loss had been crushing to him and he said of the experience, "I think I'm pretty confident in saying losing them physically over time I lost them emotionally as well, and that's not what I want to happen here." He further explained how the distance led to the erosion of his connection with the children: "That destroyed me really but I don't want that to happen again not, you know, like not so much divorce, but in terms of the kids not wanting to be around me or something like that. I'm not saying pander to them, you have to be a parent, . . . but it's just kind of, I don't know how to explain it. I had the loss and I'm not going to have a loss by pushing someone away." This need to not push someone away is similar to Alina's fear of interfering or doing the wrong thing. You can feel the gravitational pull of this black hole when he discussed his experience with Alina's daughter, too: "It's tough with [Alina's daughter] too because if I pushed too hard, she had an out, just kind of, 'I'm out of here.' Like split family dynamics and everything. It's probably I wanted to play it safe. . . . same with [second daughter]; I played it safe or else she'd never talk to me again or something like that." The fear of losing his children physically and emotionally and re-experiencing the

emotional pain of this severance was what motivated Ben to push past his fears to learn more about what his transgender child was experiencing.

I witnessed the power of Sofia's learning barrier when she spoke of her difficulty accepting her non-binary child's choice to pursue breast removal surgery. She said, "In the beginning, it was tough but now, it's okay. Because I have two surgery for my breasts . . . I had lumps. I had in the past, two surgery. I know it's painful but we don't have a choice. It's like that. We accept and we will always have him, we think. [laughs]" Sofia's black hole was her very personal experience with having lost each breast to breast cancer. Although Remy explained that they were able to accept Noël's decision to pursue breast removal surgery after observing them wear the binder during an 8-hour hike on a hot summer's day, Sofia's words evince the value that countered her fears. She said, "We don't have a choice," "it's like that," and "we accept and we will always have him." In this instance, family cohesiveness trumped her personal discomfort with body modification surgery.

Dawn's father and mother were verbally abusive and her father physically abused her elder brother who eventually committed suicide. None of her siblings are in touch today. Dawn married at barely 18 to escape her home and her relationship with Adam was her second marriage. Her stumbling block, as discussed in Finding 1, was instability within the family. When sharing her reaction to her daughter's declaration of being transgender, she wrote in her journal, "I also felt very shaken that the people around me were not what I had expected. I took comfort in looking at my husband's masculine arms and thinking 'Yes, he's still a man.' I wondered if I looked a little 'butch' so I grew my hair long and made sure to put pretty earrings on, etc. I guess this was my way of rebuilding a 'safe world' where life would not throw me more surprises – or if it did, I would have a firm foundation to protect me." At this point in Dawn's writing, she had a revelation about herself. She wrote, "When I think about this, I realize that I have been working all these years to protect myself from feeling unloved

and vulnerable. Vulnerability, fear and needing to protect myself as well as abandonment was my childhood. All the effort to break the abuse and anger in a loveless cycle for my kids wasn't just for them as I had figured it was. It looks like my attempts to 'normalize' their lives was also an attempt to 'normalize' mine. . . . This is the aha moment! It looks like I've spent my entire adult life trying to 'normalize' circumstances – and I'm still doing it. That's the control part. If I take charge of my life I can minimize the pain. That has been my motto. Any loss of this control seems disastrous to me and very threatening. Thank you for your part in initializing this realization within me. ♥” For Dawn, her vulnerability induced her to create stability in her home. Later, Dawn successfully stabilized her family by learning to widen her definition of normal and accepting her daughter as her authentic self.

One participant who I have not yet discussed is Kit. According to Kit, his emotional scars from family incest as a young man left him damaged. He confided, “My emotions became almost totally frozen to the point where I paid no attention to how I was feeling and if you actually asked, I had no clue.” As he matured into a young adult he became a sex addict and he admitted that his “own addiction didn't help because it drives me away from real people. I'm sure Jayson [his transgender child] still has scars of that. I wasn't there at home. Even when I was there, I wasn't there emotionally.” Kit, who does not have a strong relationship with his son, attended the support group but he did not share anything that indicated an emotional struggle regarding the transition either in the interviews or in the journal he wrote. In fact, more information was provided on his childhood incest, sex addiction, and failure to be physically and emotionally present as a father. When asked if he felt he had changed along the way in his journey, in the way he felt or thought, he replied no, he had not. Kit was an interesting case in that he appeared to want to be supportive, but it could be argued that his emotional black holes would need to be resolved before he could be supportive on an emotional level.

When not resolved or worked through, fears, vulnerabilities, black holes, anxiety, and anger can ignite within a parent, whether conscious of them at the time or not (Ehrensaft, 2016). Biographicity (Alheit, 2018a), or the ability to make sense of the events in one's life, can be stalled when those events become too painful, confusing, or overwhelming. In these cases, "biographically layered experiences can also block and limit new learning processes" (Alheit, 2018b) as in the cases of some of the parents in this study. Parents, such as Freda and Kendra, had worked with a counsellor to process painful events. Alina, Ben, Sofia, Dawn, and I set aside difficult emotions to attend to our children, but continued the work of biographicity in private. Kit could attend to his child's needs on a cognitive level but had difficulty accessing him on an emotional level. As Adam suggested, in his early days of attending parent support meetings, it was those who accepted the situation and their child that were able to progress: "As much as you don't want it to be, there it is. The other transgender parents, yes. They all believe it. They talk about their kids being transgender and the stuff that they're doing. There's no doubt that they're not, and I think that's—You were talking about milestones and I think that's a huge milestone. Until you believe it, you really can't be effective in helping them." These narratives demonstrated some of the many barriers to the learning process that can occur during the transition process. When strong emotions are triggered, the mind becomes overwhelmed, the parent withdraws from others, and the learning process stalls.

### **Finding 3: Authenticity and the Authentic Self**

Finding 3: A parent's evolving concept of authenticity, not necessarily their own gender identity development, influences their ability to support the gender transition of their child.

I had supposed that a parent's gender identity development through socialization might influence their ability to support their child through transition. Although many of the participants did identify role models who influenced how they categorized men or women today, my supposition was wrong. What

most influenced a parent's reaction to their child's transition were their role models of authenticity, *regardless of gender*. Authenticity, then, and the ability to encourage the authentic self of their child to emerge was a dominant theme that arose in this study. The significance being that to be your authentic gender-expansive self or to support a loved one who is, one disrupts the social norms and gendered expectations of the traditional West. Thus, learning emerges from the internal realm to the external in a public act of defiance.

### ***Autoethnography: On Authenticity***

Most of my own deeper grappling with authenticity occurred when Sam told me in 2017 he was gender queer, to which I responded from a place of fear. Sam began to express himself through both stereotypically feminine and masculine behavior, expression, and dress. In a personal reflection recorded after an interview with Amelia and Martin, I said:

I remember in the early days of transition feeling uncomfortable around the teens who were non-binary. I distinctly remember, thinking, 'Well, at least I don't have to deal with *that*.' This was, of course, an open invitation to the universe to provide me more opportunities to grow [laughs]. But now I am grateful. At the time, however, even as a support group leader, I did not fully understand the concept of the gender spectrum. Or rather, I understood it at a cognitive level, but did not appreciate it at a deeper level. I remember one mother looking to me for support and I think I failed her because in my heart, I didn't know what to do or say. I was just happy it didn't happen to me. It simply made me feel uncomfortable and I trusted my feelings. If it made me feel uncomfortable, wasn't something wrong? Through transition, Sam had transferred from one tidy pink box to one tidy blue. I was still, I guess, working within the constructs of the gender norms I had been conditioned to believe were "normal." I realize now that that was when I started questioning the gender binary itself, on a personal level. Sam wasn't "trapped inside the wrong



body,” but was on a spectrum, as I was. And freedom was being able to express yourself along that spectrum. I’m surprised that Amelia was okay with her daughter being gender fluid because for me it incited fear. I started thinking about that uncomfortable feeling I had, that gut feeling we were supposed to be able to trust. Could it be wrong?”

During this time period, I remember Sam heading out one night to meet friends and he wore a skirt, high heels and make-up. I was filled with conflicting emotions but heading them off was fear. I feared how others would “read” him. If he was read as female or as feminine trans, I wanted to council him as a mother might council her daughter to be safe—never walk alone in the dark, be aware of your surroundings, park in a lighted area, etc. The instincts of mothering a daughter came back with a whoosh, after having raised a son for six years. I was temporarily confused in this, not knowing how to proceed in this bit of “gender education” after years of witnessing him working to “pass” as male. Ultimately, I did not say anything and he went out and later returned without issue. Issues for me, however, had been raised once again. This experience provided enough tension or motivation to catalyze me to work through my discomfort on an emotional level—Sam had gone public.

Later in 2017, during this time of gender scrutiny, I wrote a paper for my Global Trends in Adult Learning class. I wrote about Sam’s progress, and mine, in this reflection on gender:

. . . today he has a beard, dresses like a man, and wears nail polish and earrings. Now, of course, I understand the concept of a [gender] spectrum and recognize the danger that exists when there is a cultural norm of gender binaries. The two-spirit people of many First Nation people, as well as the Fa’afafine of the Samoan Islands, were respected within their communities owing to their hybrid nature until Western civilizations razed their cultures and patriarchal hegemony and misogyny replaced them (Sheppard & Mayo, 2013; Vasey & Bartlett, 2007). I remember someone mentioned that transgender people differ from the two-spirit in that the former fully transition to the opposite

[sic] gender while two-spirit are not confined by labels. Consider our culture and the insistence that we abide by gender norms or face abuse, physical harm, or death through hate crimes (Butler, 2004). It is far safer to transition completely in the West than live as a third gender today. I wonder if people today were honored and respected for their gender variant selves if they might not make the transition through hormones (via injections) and painful, expensive surgeries. Perhaps they would have the luxury of being completely content with exactly who they are without transitioning at all.

In this reflection, there is tension between what I had learned of the histories of gender expression in various non-Western cultures and Western culture's destruction of their ways of being. I later learned that fewer gender-expansive people today were electing to have surgeries and administer hormones conceivably because the stigma of gender-expansiveness is lessening in the West (Meadow, 2016). I knew I needed to confront my personal discomfort with gender fluidity. I had read all I could on the topic. My epiphany came in the discomfort itself. I recognized that the discomfort was cultural, that the cultural norms themselves were wrong and I would need to challenge society itself, thus pushing beyond the three personal learning domains (see Figure 6) and into society. Only by challenging this cultural dynamic, and the power that came with it, was I to overcome it and, the more I have done so, the more I have felt gratitude for those who challenged gender norms in the early days. Sumara and Davis (1999) expressed the audacity of transgender and queer people who walk their own path with these words: "Rather, 'queer' functions as a marker representing interpretive work that refuses what Halley has called 'the heterosexual bribe'—that is, the cultural rewards afforded those whose public performances of self are contained within the narrow band of behaviors considered proper to a heterosexual identity" (p. 192). I admire the courage it takes to reject that bribe, at all costs. As I watched my son struggle, nearly dying

in his teens as suicidal ideation gripped him, and then reemerge with confidence, I cannot help but wonder if I could be as brave and authentic as he.

Sam's inscription in my 2017 birthday card demonstrated the value of authenticity:

I may not express it much and I can never understand to the true extent, but I'm so thankful for everything you've done for me as a mother. Don't ever think you've failed as a mother because I recognize how much you've given for [sister] and I. Your flexibility and open-mindedness have helped me become the same and your acceptance of my queerness and madness has made it immensely easier to love and accept myself.

It was this experience more than any other that pushed my learning beyond the internal, personal experience into an external public rejection of gendered norms typically valued and replicated by Western society. These public displays of learning were not done without courage and integrity on my part—as I fueled fear and reservations for doing anything so visible in public. If I had a choice, I would lead a more private life but to love my son, I have to rebel.

### ***Seeing People as Individuals***

It had been my supposition that a parent's personal sense of gender would influence their ability to support their child through transition. My conjecture was based on my own experience of gender but this only seemed to be the case for a few parents. Instead, the role models of a parent's past and their life experiences seem to have shaped their appreciation for authenticity, or the ability to see people as individuals regardless of gender, culture, race, and to value them as such. Note that one of the questions in our first interview on the participants' biographies asked then about their role models. Although gender was a theme in this interview, this question was purposely open-ended, not specific to role models of a particular gender. Some participants had role models who impressed upon them the value of seeing a person's worth through their words or actions. These individuals did not have experiences with

gender non-conformity, yet their values reinforced the import of personal integrity. Others had had the fortune of meeting gender expansive people who lived their authentic lives with beauty and dignity. Such meetings, especially early in their child's transition, left a powerful impression on these parents. Others experienced living a life where they became eager for change to realign their lives with their authentic selves. Some parents have experienced the pain of witnessing their child recoil from other's harsh judgements. Then there were others who had felt the joy of seeing their child embraced by those who loved and accepted them notwithstanding.

Mike, Kendra's husband, was raised on a farm outside of Calgary, but knew early in his life that he did not belong there. He explained, "I'm thinking you have that sense of who you are, and then society tries to beat that out of you, for the rest of your life. I do, because I think they want to stick you in this label market, right? Anyway, I think with Alice she knew early on and we did not have the experience or any background to understand what she was trying to say, but she was well aware, early on. When I was little I knew, there was no way I was a farmer." Later, when Mike left the farm and pursued schooling in engineering, he again felt it was not the right fit. When asked to expand, he said, "Yes, if you're given the opportunity to experience the things that validate you, that's why I'm thinking, your society wants to push you in a direction, right? . . . engineering for me was a wrong choice, and I did it to please my old man. He was so proud to tell everybody I was an engineer. Then when I told my father, this isn't for me, this is for the birds. That was like a blow to him, I'm sure. He didn't like that." Mike often drew a comparison between "knowing" who you are and sometimes having to withstand or ignore the expectations of society to be true to yourself. He also had the ability to see people as individuals, a value he learned from his father. He said, "There is a comment that I tell my kids all the time, and this was from my dad. I don't know where he got it from. He said, 'It's not your race, your color, or your orientation that makes you a jerk. If you're a jerk, you're a jerk all on your own. None of

those other things apply.’” This theme came through in Mike’s interviews repeatedly, taking exception with me if a question of mine asked him to make a generalization about gender or race. Mike was able to accept Alice with ease because he valued authenticity and saw her be true to who she was.

Kendra also valued authenticity possibly due to her trauma of keeping ugly secrets as a child. To prevent secrecy, she developed a home where transparency and truth were at the heart. Her father was eventually arrested for sexual abuse and Kendra chose to not hide it. She explained, “I already had Alice then, dealing with my dad and the cops but she was just really little. She knows. I've never really hid it from her or even with her teenage group of friends, you know, they all kind of knew. I mean, they didn't know any details, but they knew I was an incest survivor and then an abuse survivor. If they had questions or whatever, I wanted them to come to me. That was all open. If Alice thought somebody was in trouble she would say to them, ‘You know, you could talk to my mom about this, right?’” Kendra contrasted this to her grandmother’s stories of young women in the “old days” who got pregnant. With a grin on her face, she said, “My granny told a story that was really interesting. I was about 15, and we had a cousin come up from the States who was my dad's age, my dad's first cousin. He's started in on the teenagers nowadays. This was the early '70s, right, and my granny just laid into him. One of the things she said is, that in their community you were only visited by horse and buggies so it wasn't very often that you'd go to someone else's house. You'd show up and they'd say, ‘Oh, our oldest daughter is actually sick,’ or whatever. Then when you came back six months later, there would be a new baby for mom. She said that happened all the time and everybody knew it wasn't mom's baby. . . She's like, ‘These kids are at least honest. They get knocked up, they tell you, and we deal with it. It's not like it was back then.’ It was an interesting story to put things in perspective. She was very much a feminist, my paternal grandmother. Yes, so that's kind of cool.” Truth, transparency, and authenticity are central values in Kendra’s life.

Although Nadine's conservative church filled a need for her in her younger years, she grew dissatisfied as the church precepts clashed with some values she had pushed aside. For instance, she remembered in 2008 when many church members got involved in California's Proposition 8 opposing same-sex marriage even if they lived outside the state. She said, "I think the church was getting more involved in politics, like with Prop 8 and stuff. I remember arguing with people on the internet and spouting the church's lines on why it was okay to be interfering in this whatever, but on some level, a part of me knew that this was not right. Sometimes the people you're arguing with, they are arguing too hard because they are trying to convince themselves. It's not about convincing you. It's about, they're trying to convince themselves that what they're doing isn't wrong." Nadine eventually grew dissatisfied with the church and the traditional role of women within it. She had been raised in a home where "Chores weren't separated by gender. Actually, I watched my dad do a lot of cooking and chores" and she heard her mother "speak proudly about the fact that her dad had marched during the civil rights movement." Furthermore, Nadine had herself come out as lesbian later in life. She confessed that "It didn't dawn on me that there was an option other than you can grow up and get married to guy and that's what life looks like . . . it took me so long to figure myself out was because I had no representation." Nadine has been on a journey that has taught her to value authenticity within herself and others. These incidents are but a glimpse into the many stories that exemplify the value authenticity.

### ***Person is the Same***

When transitioning, some parents experience ambiguous loss where they felt they had lost the child they knew only to be replaced by a stranger. Conversely, because Mike sees people as individuals, there was no ambiguity nor loss when Alice transitioned. He conveyed his thoughts in this humorous exchange: "I think the older kid said it the best. What does it matter? His perspective was, 'It doesn't matter because the personality didn't change.' How they present themselves and all of that, doesn't

change. [Alice] still takes three hours to eat a meal, is still as messy as ever. The gender thing did not change any of that, right, so we didn't lose anybody. It's our perception of that person, we may have lost but the—Is she full of beans and goofy? She swears she gets that from me.” Whether a person identifies as female, male, or non-binary, it does not matter to Mike as he recognizes that the personality remains the same.

Dawn’s experience of discerning her child within was shared through her journal. She wrote, “Having felt like I lost my child and like I just didn't know who she was, I experienced a pivotal moment when she and I were sitting on the sofa side by side and as I looked into her eyes—I saw her soul. It was the same soul that I had come to know and love for all those years. I felt relief and comfort along with understanding that this was the same person.” In a confessional quote, Dawn wrote about how ironic it was that she resisted her daughter’s transition. She admitted, “That's quite odd when you think of how I encouraged her for 10 years prior to her informing us that she was transgender—to just ‘be yourself,’ and ‘embrace who you are and get on with life.’” With time, Dawn was able to see through the veneer of gender to see the soul of her child, to embrace her, and to get on with her stabilized life.

### ***Role Models***

Role models came in the form of family members, such as Adam’s father, Kendra’s grandmother, Nadine’s parents, or Dawn’s child. They also came from other parents in support group meetings and in gender expansive people who live their lives genuinely.

Alina and Ben’s parents both made an impression on them with regard to equality and non-judgment. Alina, who was raised in an egalitarian household was disturbed when visiting her cousin’s home where the chores were unfairly divided and separated by gender. She said, “It really bothered me when I saw inequality in life, in a sense, because my parents were always very equal. My mom, without a doubt, was the financial person in the family. My dad would give her all the money. My dad would do

all the maintenance stuff because that's what he loves to do. They were each other's bosses of whatever it was that they were good at, and my dad always helped cooking and cleaning. It's always to provide for things. Everybody had to play their part. When I see relationships where the women did all the cooking and all the—that bothered me.” Ben, on the other hand, learned about withholding judgment from his mother. He shared one instance related to sexuality: “My mother would show *Three's Company*, way back when Jack Tripper had to pretend he was gay. I was just little when Mr. Furley was doing that [gestures]. When I asked my mom, ‘What does gay mean?’ She said, ‘It's when a man lives with another man and he's like a wife but he lives with another man.’ I said, ‘Is that all right?’ I think my mom says, ‘People got to be themselves,’ and, ‘Yes, sure, it's all right.” So I was kind of, ‘All right.’”

For this couple who are new to parenting a gender non-conforming child, these complementary values are consistent with their approach to supporting their child. They allow their child to express herself, knowing she is young and still developing her sense of gender, but allowing her the freedom nonetheless. Studies on young boys who are drawn to feminine attire and toys show that some “persist” to be transgender or gender non-conforming, others “desist” and grow up to be gay men, and still others pass through this as a phase (Brooks, 2018). From their interviews, they indicated they would try to support their child regardless of the direction she would take.

Amelia was well traveled due to her father's international career. She had even spent a year in an intentional community in Europe where no gendered expectations existed. She wrote, “I met incredibly strong women, women who had voice and stature and power in the community, and men who took that in their stride and expected it. I met men who were sensitive, reflective and demonstrably caring, and women who took that in their stride and expected it. I met women who were plumbers and men who were caregivers.” This community encourage men and women to be more androgynous, freeing its members of the constrictions of male and female traditional roles. This experience made quite an



impression on Amelia who was then in her 20s, as she saw people being their authentic selves exhibiting balanced characters traits. Martin, her husband, demonstrated androgyny when he spent time as a stay-at-home father to his eldest daughter. Like Amelia, he too shared egalitarian values. As I interviewed Amelia, I could hear Findhorn in her words and see Findhorn in her strength of character, and, like Findhorn, she was in balance. This was most interesting as her child identified as gender fluid, a concept that was new to her and one that she was exploring with curiosity and a desire to understand. As her own child lives fluidly, Amelia draws on her own experience of living in balance with all genders.

### ***Challenging Social Norms***

Kelley's story was one of heartache and perseverance as she very publicly battled authenticity in the court system of a small city in Alberta. At the age of four, her child, Kayleigh, began showing an interest in feminine clothing and Kelley allowed her to explore this aspect of herself. Eventually, however, Kayleigh's father resisted. Not only did he refuse Kayleigh to wear typically feminine clothing or use her female name, but he served Kelley with a court order indicating she was an unfit mother to "encourage" her son to wear girl's clothing. The legal issues grew into a nightmare as Kelley was court ordered to dress Kayleigh in boy's clothing in public. Thus, Kayleigh was treated as a boy at her father's home, her female name was stripped of her locker at preschool and she was called by her male name, and she was only allowed to be her authentic self when with her mother. Then Kelley's ex-husband took her to court again and gained full custody. The following conversation highlights the power of the court system to allow moral or religious conviction to determine a case:

Interviewer: That must've been so hard for [Kayleigh].

Kelley: She didn't have the capacity to comprehend. She didn't even know what a judge was. I didn't say a judge. She didn't have that ability to understand that she can't just be herself after I gave her that free range, and we didn't get that much time. It was less than a month of her fully

living like that before the court thing happened, before I was served. The court order, because you have to wait, you get served, they have time. I was served Friday, November 13th, and we went to court the following Tuesday.

Interviewer: Oh my.

Kelley: That was the following Tuesday, because they made it urgent because usually, you'd--

Interviewer: That's fast.

Kelley: Yes, because it was the press-- It was urgent because it was that bad. . . .The first court appearance was more like, they assigned a court-appointed psychologist to assess the child. She never assessed her.

Interviewer: Really?

Kelley: No. She chose to be a parent mediator and that's not what the court wanted, but if you challenge that and you say, 'No, that's not what you were hired for,' then you're being uncooperative. You just have to go along with it. Then they assigned Kayleigh her own lawyer and her lawyer has religious beliefs that don't accept or allow transgender individuals. Very biased. We were doomed from the very beginning.

At this point, in desperation, Kelley reached out to an LGBTQ2S-friendly legal service in Edmonton and she agreed to go public with her story. News of her story became national, and this put pressure on the judicial system when she returned to court to regain custody of Kayleigh. She did regain custody, but she and Kayleigh have endured public threats and ostracism within the town, and Kelley lost some of her clientele because of her decision to publicly battle the court.

Kelley and Kayleigh, who is today only 8 years old, have paid the price for defending authenticity, challenging social conventions, and Kayleigh is working through post-traumatic stress disorder. Kelley said, "We've had our issues and troubles, but it's a lot better. We're doing really good,

every day just gets better and better and just moving forward, moving past all of it. I think in the future, it'll be more looking towards making sure this doesn't happen again. I don't want to see this in the media. I don't want to see another judge order that, and if it does happen, there should be some repercussions for someone with that authority, in that power, to make a decision that way. You can't say you had no idea.” She and Kayleigh are partners on this authentic journey, however, and are working toward healing.

Kendra, who recently watched gender non-conforming activist Jacob Tobia on *The Daily Show with Trevor Noah*, suggested promoting the term “gender chill.” Kendra sees herself as a bit gender chill herself and appreciates the term because she sees that society is almost obsessed with the gender binary. She says, “T-shirt and jeans is what you see me in all the time. That's who I'm married to, too. That's who Mike is. Although I do get dressed up, . . . I've gone through years where I wore dresses every day or skirts every day or whatever. I just have a choice. That's what I like. Now, I want to build the term knowledge around gender chill. . . . For me, it's never really mattered, the gender. I don't feel that anybody should be judged on it and I don't. Gender chill.” Gender chill, as Tobia candidly described it, is not a future without gender or gender neutrality, but “a world where gender is this playful thing. A world where there's no patriarchy, no misogyny—none of the things that make gender suck” (Garcia, 2019). This freedom from definition, in many ways, allowed Kendra and her family to live authentically outside traditional gender constructs and to let others how they see fit, too.

Freda struggled with telling her church members about her daughter's transition. To her surprise, however, the pastors of her church supported her and eventually allowed her and five other families to share their stories publicly in church. In her journal, Freda wrote, “Our pastors took a lot of abuse from some homophobic church members who are very vocal about not liking the new, more affirmative position that has transpired. Right now, our church has a smaller attendance, we have a smaller budget,

and some people are still quite vocal about their disapproval – but it is real.” Although I heard stories of religious intolerance during my interviews, this story illustrated the courage of the pastors and church members who supported Freda’s family, very publicly, to live as God had created them.

Each participant demonstrated in their own way how their learning pushed beyond the internal dimensions of learning and into the social and societal aspects of the social domain. From their stories, parents were not necessarily “ready” to challenge social norms, but most were ready enough. That is, like me, they had gleaned enough knowledge about the nature of gender, had the motivation to nurture the authentic nature of their child, and had gained spousal or community support through support groups. But eventually public action was required for many of the parents. For Kelley, it was through the court system, for Freda it was with her church, for Alina and Ben it was through conversations with the principal, for Sofia and Remy it was top surgery. Not all, but most parents pushed the boundary of gender norms in one way or another to ensure that their child could live authentically in a world with laws that guarantee freedom and safety, in churches that protect the marginalized, in classrooms with fair and informed teachers, and with societal members who make room for difference and individuality.

### ***Summary***

This chapter reviewed the findings from this study. Data from the individual interviews, participant journals, and the autoethnography revealed their past histories, their narratives of when their child transitioned, and their personal accounts of how they felt during this experience. Through analysis, many themes arose from the rich data, but of these the three dominant themes that best represented parent voices and experience included 1) holistic learning for parents is supported by a balance of social support, cognitive growth, emotional reassurance, and time, 2) a parent’s unresolved issues can restrict a parent’s ability to fully engage in supporting their child even when they are willing to do so, and 3) a

parent's concept of authenticity influences their ability to support the gender transition of their child.

The implications of this thematic analysis, how they contribute to the literature, and future directions for research are explored in the following chapter, Discussion: Analysis and Synthesis.

## Chapter 5: Discussion

*“What the fuck's wrong with you? Like, you've got reserved a more privileged place. Why would you want to take that step back?”* (Kendra, interview)

It was my purpose to better understand the learning processes of parents of gender-expansive children of all ages. Experience and research have shown that this journey is a deeply personal one for parents, but it also involves a public defiance of traditional gendered norms. Although acceptance for gender-expressive children is growing, gender norming in Canada has not gotten to the point where authentic gender expression is a part of the dominant culture. My research questions, then, probed parents to divulge their very personal experiences to consider how their own gender identity development informed their experience, how they navigated any tension created during the transition period, and whether their learning experience was, in fact, transformative.

Understandably, I employed life history methodology and methods to guide my exploration of each participant's personal narrative, questioning each on the time period, culture, country, and context of their upbringing. This led into their journey with their gender expansive child and their evolving understandings, feelings, and intuitions. The generous data from the interviews, journals, and autoethnography were then analyzed thematically and three dominant themes reverberated through the narratives: 1) holistic learning for parents is supported by a balance of social support, cognitive growth, emotional reassurance, and a restructuring of gendered norms, 2) a parent's unresolved issues can restrict their ability to fully engage in supporting their child even when they are willing to do so, and 3) a parent's concept of authenticity influences their ability to support the gender transition of their child.

In this chapter, I discuss the findings as they relate to the research questions and the intent of this study. At this point in my research, I revisited the original research questions, (re)read the literature that applied to the themes that arose in the findings, worked through Bloomberg and Volpe's (2016)

Analysis Tools to deepen my inquiry, and identified new themes and connections that surfaced. The following are three arguments that synthesize the theoretical connections and implications of the findings that arose from the research questions. These arguments explore 1) the two stages of psycho-critical transformative learning that became evident in the parent narratives, 2) the process of reframing gender frames particularly within a feminist framework, and 3) the deconstruction of gender and the queering of authenticity that has, in effect, made it easier for gender transition today.

### **Research Question 1: Psycho-critical Transformative Learning**

I began this study with the research question: To what extent were parents' experiences transformative learning (Mezirow, 1978) and how did parents make the cognitive-affective shift from where they were to where they are today? For this, I returned to Elizabeth Lange's (2013) psycho-critical definition of transformative learning. As stated in Chapter 1, transformative learning is the process of "examining the very premises of one's thought system and confronting realities that no longer fit within one's existing world view"; it is the "critical reflection on habitual ways of knowing and assumptions within one's world view" (Lange, 2013, p. 109). Lange argues that transformative learning is the process of questioning assimilated worldviews and then recognizing how these function in and restrict one's life (Lange, 2013). I used psycho-critical transformative learning theory as the vehicle to analyze the socio-culturally constructed experiences of parents and how their experiences with their child's transition both challenged and changed them. Most parents in this study did, in fact, experience transformative learning as defined by Lange, but their learning can be divided into two stages—perspective transformation (Mezirow, 1981) followed by emancipatory biographical praxis as defined by Hoggan et al. (2017) if learning shifts to action, such as when advocating for their child and educating others. I will look to perspective transformation, emancipatory biographical praxis, and how these two processes address the ways parents made the cognitive-affective shift from their early days in the child's

transformation to the time of my interviews.

### ***Perspective Transformation and Emancipatory Biographical Praxis***

From the intimate conversations I had with the participants, all but two experienced both perspective transformation and the actionable process of emancipatory biographical praxis. Participants in this study often experienced perspective transformation; specifically, the reconfiguration of their gender frames of reference (Fisk & Ridgeway, 2018) or as Dawn described it, “like silly putty, your brain is being stretched.” In this first stage of transformative learning these parents were able to biographicize (Alheit, 2018a) or restructure their understanding of gender as a binary to gender as a continuum. The only exception here was Nadine who would likely be defined by Ryan (2016) as a gender-subversive parent, one who has had prior experience with the LGBTQ2S+ community and who actively works to “disrupt dominant gender schemas” (p. 3). As a lesbian, Nadine was already quite educated before her child’s transition, and her journal shared her activism and passion to address lack of representation in books, in the media, and in the school system. With her daughter’s transition, she expanded her social justice lens to represent those who are gender expansive, too.

My research question asked how parents made the cognitive-affective shift from where they were to where they are today. Most parents in the study shifted from perspective transformation (Mezirow, 1981), where they developed a newer understanding of gender, to praxis, or the resolve to challenge the norms or laws within Western society that limit the full expression of gender. This second stage of learning, which I call emancipatory biographical praxis as defined by Hoggan et al. (2017), is learning that leads to “freedom and human flourishing” (p. 58) or “ideological critique and participation in collective activity” (p. 59). Although Mezirow gestured toward social action in his essays and he was clearly influenced by the sociocultural emancipatory work of Paolo Freire (1968), his theory of transformation learning primarily had an individualistic approach that focuses more on critical



awareness of self and self-actualization (Hoggan et al., 2017). In fact, Hoggan et al. (2017) proposed that “Mezirow (1989, 1990) also stresses that perspective transformation is something that may or may not be linked to emancipatory social action” (p. 58). Similarly, Lange (2013) wrote that for [Freire’s] social-emancipatory transformative learning “the intent of education is not personal transformation, although that will happen; it is societal transformation, where education fosters action against poverty, oppression, repression, and injustice, and for social justice, equality, democracy, and freedom” (p. 110). I would argue that in the case of the transformation of the parents in this study, it was the opposite: the intent of education is not *social* transformation, although that will happen; it is personal transformation that *may or may not* lead to social action. In fact, when parents begin their journey it is often only to gain enough information to stabilize the family. It is the love of their child and fear of society that propels them to transform understandings of gender. However, as parents acknowledge that society’s gender norms are based on superficial understandings of gender and that by challenging them, they not only make life better for their own child but for all people, they often join others in a movement for social change.

In their essay on “Developing the Theory of Perspective Transformation: Continuity, Intersubjectivity, and Emancipatory Praxis,” Hoggan et al. (2017) suggest bridging perspective and praxis in two ways: first, “through emancipatory forms of praxis which occur on a biographical level” and second, “praxis capable of effecting emancipatory institutional and social change” (p. 60). The first involves a more personal experience of biographicity where the parent then takes action, while the second form of praxis the parent challenges the sociocultural sphere. All parents, except one, shared with me examples of the first form of emancipatory biographical praxis or the second more vocal form of praxis, challenging the dominant social culture and its metanarratives (Lyotard, 1979/1984). Kit’s learning journey may have been transformative on a cognitive level but he admitted that “I wasn’t there

at home. Even when I was there, I wasn't there emotionally.” When asked if he had changed on his journey, he was the only participant who answered no. He then added, “Perhaps I've become more accepting of people for just who they are and who they might be.” His tenuous relationship with his son and his inability to be in touch with his emotions has apparently limited his experience with perspective transformation.

For all of the other the parents in this study, this emancipatory biographical praxis was often an ethical and moral dilemma—finding the courage to speak up because it is the “right” thing to do. Brookfield (1998) wrote of how “the concept of moral learning is curiously absent from the literature of the field [of transformative learning]” (p. 283) and little has been written to disconfirm his statement except, arguably, in the area of emancipatory transformation. Parents demonstrated moral courage when they admitted their fears but advocated for their child because it was the ethical thing to do and it was this conviction that propelled them forward despite their fears. I bring back the voices of the participants momentarily to demonstrate the significant transformation they have undergone. I had asked each parent if they felt they had changed on this journey and many self-selected the word “advocate” or “advocacy” when answering and stressed they had come a long way to get to this point:

Freda: I think the most challenging has been doing the advocacy within the church and going against rigid religious rules and backing that.

Kelley: I think I've changed in a way of being an advocate in a sense where I have that confidence that I am a good leader and I do have the skill and the ability to move a mountain.

Amelia: I'm thinking about people- if somebody makes a remark, I can advocate more effectively. Instead of just a visceral, Why did you say something hateful? I actually have something more solid to say.

Kendra: It's made me more open. It's made me more of an advocate, an activist. It's made me much more accepting.

Savannah: When I think back to what my passions were in college, and what my direction was going to be, I would probably never have thought that I would be an advocate or an ally. I mean, like I said I was always fine. I always had friends that were whatever, but I was never a voice for them. I would never have seen myself actually standing up and being like this.

Savannah and Nadine have led workshops on gender and many have attended or led other advocacy events offered by the LGBTQ2S+ centres in their community or online. For these parents, their perspective transformations led to emancipatory biographical praxis “effecting emancipatory institutional and social change” (Hoggan et al., 2017, p. 60). Their convictions stemmed from their newfound understandings of gender construction and their need to educate the world such that their child might have a safe place within it.

### ***Queering Metanarratives of Gender***

In the liminal space between perspective transformation (Mezirow, 1981) and emancipatory biographical praxis (Hoggan et al., 2017), there are often moments of reevaluating feelings of discomfort. Many of the parents mention those “locker room moments” when they realize their new private commitment to their child may require public noncompliance. In the space between perspective and practice, many parents psychologically prepare themselves. As members of society, we make a tacit agreement to uphold the social norms within it. Ewert (1991) reasoned that “the central concept of *complying with a norm* means fulfilling a generalized expectation of behavior. The latter does not have the cognitive sense of expecting a predicted event, but the normative sense that members are *entitled* to expect a certain behavior” (p. 85). In this respect, social norms allow members of society to predict behavior, know what to do or how to behave in situations, and mitigate feelings of anxiety when in new

environments. This is a vital element of stabilizing society, and yet it can also be restrictive if the metanarratives (Lyotard, 1979/1984) on which they are based are themselves constricted. Many parents initially struggled against their child's insistence that they were a different gender because social norms "can restrict adult thinking and acting" (Mezirow, 1991). When in the liminal space between perspective and praxis, a parent may still feel discomfort when their child's gender performance is misaligned with gender role expectations and yet they also feel discomfort with their own discomfort. Instead of "trusting your gut," sitting in the discomfort and analyzing these feelings can be informative or even transformative. Instead of resisting, resenting, or repelling uncomfortable feelings, many parents reevaluated metanarratives of gender, rejected negative feelings that no longer served a purpose, and then moved forward with a stronger commitment to social justice. In doing so, they expanded their conceptions of gender (Goldberg & Kuvshinov, 2018) and began the process of queering Western gender metanarratives.

The restrictive nature of gender norming and policing is evident in a surprising Israeli study that aimed to test the assumption that "normative" people have a core gender identity that is aligned with their biological sex while those who are gender expansive or non-heterosexual might "trouble" the alignment (Joel et al., 2014). Answering a Multi-Gender Identity Questionnaire including 32 items on gender identity or performance, 2,155 participants indicated whether they felt more feminine, masculine, both, or neither. The findings indicated that over 35% of the "'normative' subjects experience themselves in ways that transcend the either/or logic of the gender binary system" (Joel et al., 2014, p. 310). At least one third of "normative" individuals in this anonymous study revealed the complex nature of their gender identity; that's one person in three.

This study illuminates what Judith Butler argued in *Gender Trouble* (1990/2007), that while the gender binaries appear stable, they are variable. "There is no gender identity behind the expressions of

gender;” Butler (1990/2007) wrote, “that identity is performatively constituted by the very ‘expressions’ that are said to be its results” (p. 34). Thus, the more the performance is repeated, the more stable the gender appears. Conversely, refusing to repeat a performance creates disequilibrium and Butler gestures to the possibilities within this disruption. Drag shows are in one respect an example of this disequilibrium as the participants not only “perform” gender but often perform gender as it is expressed by a particular culture, race, or class (Butler, 1993; Lennon & Alsop, 2020). The recent popularity of television shows such as RuPaul’s Drag Race demonstrate the queering of gender. When asked if transgender people could participate in RuPaul’s drag competition, he hesitantly responded, “Drag loses its sense of danger and its sense of irony once it’s not men doing it, because at its core it’s a social statement and a big f-you to male-dominated culture. So for men to do it, it’s really punk rock, because it’s a real rejection of masculinity” (Brown, 2014, p. 63).

Queering the metanarratives of gender can be as punk rock, as drag or as subtle as the “everyday acts of resistance, in which we fail to follow the expected pathways for bodies categorized as ours” or our children (Lennon & Alsop, 2020, p. 127). Queering is the “process of destabilization and subversion of categories” (Lennon & Alsop, 2020, p. 126), categories or metanarratives that no longer serve us or define us, and that are harmful in their restrictive policing of behaviour. As the parents in my study moved into the emancipatory biographical praxis (Hoggin, et al., 2017), they began to queer the metanarratives in Canadian society, in the school systems, in the courts, and in their places of worship. They became advocates for change. The Israeli study discovered that one-third of the anonymous participants demonstrated a complex gender identity, or a gender identity that did not consistently align with their sex. Would a replicated study in Canada show similar results? And if one-third of “normative” Canadians do not have a core gender identity that aligns with their sex, then what does that mean for them living in society that polices and sanctions crossing gender lines? What of our gender expansive

children? Parents in this study came to recognize the danger inherent in a society that maintains metanarratives of gender and the violence that occurs when citizens are given tacit permission to enact punishment for failing to support or choosing to break gendered expectations. The researchers in the Israel study (Joel et al., 2014) concluded that:

the current view of gender identity as binary and unitary does not reflect the gender experience of many “normative” individuals. Replacing this view with a less dichotomous and more flexible and fluid view of gender identity, which better describes the experiences of “normative” subjects, will also accommodate the experiences of transgender individuals and enable them to express their felt gender identity without having to be at risk of becoming socially unintelligible. (p. 315)

By challenging and queering gender metanarratives, all people gain the freedom of expressing themselves without the threat of transgressing a gender-assigned binary. From perspective transformation, through a liminal stage of discomfort, to emancipatory praxis, the parents in this study overcame their fears, discomfort, or reservations to actively queer metanarratives of gender.

## **Research Question 2: Reframing Gender and Gender Frames**

The second question that guided this study was, How does a parent’s own gender identity development inform their interpretation of the gender transition of the child? For most parents, their own gender identity development did not appear to play a salient role in interpreting the gender transition of their child. Although parents challenged stereotypes and social norms formed in their youth, for most parents their own gender identity development was not central to their experience with their child. Rather, most parents navigated the tensions of this transitional period by holding to values that supported their child and holding to family values (Norwood, 2012). Authenticity was a central value and this will be discussed in the next section discussing research question 3. It was notable, however, that the four parents who were aggravated by the notion of gendered power dynamics during transition were the same

parents who expressed a consciousness-raising experience related to second wave feminism in their youth, whether they played an active role in the movement or not. In this section on research question 2, I will discuss this connection between 1960-80s feminism and turmoil felt by some of today's feminist parent during their child's gender transition.

### ***Second Wave Feminism and Transition***

“Womanpower means the self determination of women,” wrote feminist Germaine Greer (1970), “and that means all the baggage of paternalistic society will have to be thrown overboard” (p. 108). Her most famous book, *The Female Eunuch*, was published the year I was born and she, like many other feminists of the 1960-80s, contributed to the consciousness-raising about systemic forms of oppression by the “patriarchy.” Women considered how “the personal is political” (Hanisch, 1970, p. 14) and that “[o]ne is not born, but rather becomes, a woman” (de Beauvoir, 1973, p. 301). Women considered their own socialization and acculturation and many resisted systemic oppressions and were outraged by the explicit and implicit injustices and limitations imposed upon women enough to foment the second wave of the feminist movement. During this period of second wave feminism, there was a focus on the solidarity of women as women worked together toward gaining universal rights and freedoms (Hines, 2019). Hines (2019) argued that “[t]he positioning of ‘woman’ at the nexus of the feminist project enabled second wave feminism to define its political goals and demarcate its political community. Following the theorization of gender roles as hierarchical, feminist cultures emerged as sites of resistance” (Hines, 2019, p. 147). Women have, arguably, gained freedoms, rights, and opportunities due to their resistance in numbers.

For some of us, redefining “woman” has been a recurrent task through the years as the political, cultural, and personal climates shift in our lives. I, for one, was a working mother married to a feminist man who shared household chores and supported my career. And yet, when Sam came out as gender

expansive, it was like raking through the pebbles of a fish pond. What had appeared to be a stable, idyllic pool of clear water, wisteria and water lilies, became clouded and polluted with unsettled sediment. I was left, once again, to filter through the definitions and conclusions I had drawn in the past. For feminist mothers who have only known a gender binary, outraged that one gender dominates the other, the emergence of a gender expansive child can stir up many emotions and questions. If gender falls along a spectrum and not a binary, where does that leave feminist theory? If transitioning to female, can your trans daughter leave behind her male privilege? If you identify as non-binary, how do you experience privilege? If socialized as one gender, can you ever completely become another? Can one ever fully transition at all? Or are we all in transition, all becoming? These thoughts stir up the muck as old outrages resurface, as well as old meaning perspectives that have not been scrutinized through the lens of time and experience. In her essay, "Choosing to lose our gender expertise: Queering sex/gender in school settings," DePalma (2013) wrote, "when confronted with trans experience of any sort, we are invited to unlearn what we think we know about what sex, gender, and sexuality are and how they correlate" (p. 3). It seems that to move forward as a parent, you must first unlearn what you know because "critical trans-affirming pedagogy is unlearning and releasing normative conceptualizations of gender" (LeMaster & Johnson, 2019, p. 192). By relearning and redefining "woman" and seeking to understand my non-binary child, some mothers may see their own gender differently. Amelia wrestled with her fears and frustrations but eventually surmised: "The question is: What makes a woman?" From here, her redefinition and assessment of womanhood began. Certainly, internalized sexism makes less sense if the binary is dead so that gender frame can be reframed (Eagly & Wood, 2012). In many ways, mothers can be liberated from the constraints of gender, not just their children. We are not born, after all, a woman.



To take this one step further, the resistance to the “patriarchy” can still be heard today through the writings of radical feminists. Many of their precepts still resonate with me. Radical feminist work for the solidarity of women, ending violence against women, and tackling the root problems of patriarchy are all worthy causes. However, there are many radical feminists who identify themselves as “gender critical” or, as trans-activists call them, Trans Exclusionary Radical Feminists (TERF). In the media, J. K. Rowling, author of the Harry Potter series has incensed her fans with her “gender critical” viewpoints. In 1979, Janice Raymond contended in *The Transsexual Empire* that gender was strictly defined by biology and was then shaped and reinforced through gender socialization. She famously wrote, “All transsexuals rape women's bodies by reducing the real female form to an artifact, appropriating this body for themselves.” Radical feminists reason that “Anyone born a man retains male privilege in society; even if he chooses to live as a woman—and accept a correspondingly subordinate social position—the fact that he has a choice means that he can never understand what being a woman is really like” (Goldberg, 2014, p. 3). In this view, sex and gender are bonded together and you can not leave your privilege behind. Radical feminist Germaine Greer arguably struggled with this concept herself when asked her views on transgender women on a television show called Q&A. She began by saying, “I agree that when I first was thinking about what is a woman I fell for the usual view that women were people with two X’s and men were people with an X and a Y, which made life nice and easy for me. And I now realise, partly because I’m not entirely immune to information, that this was wrong” but then as the conversation turned to Caitlyn Jenner, she backpeddled, claiming it was unfair that “a man who has lived for 40 years as a man and had children with a woman and enjoyed the services—the unpaid services of a wife, which most women will never know—then decides that the whole time he’s been a woman” (Wahlquist, 2016). From an observer’s

point of view, it appeared that Greer understood what it meant to be transgender on a cognitive level, but the affective domain, the anger and outrage, still had a strong hold.

Resistant and radical, TERFs often exude resentment to the “patriarchy” and I would argue that for many feminists gender is an emotionally charged topic, even triggering. This would explain my underlying and often illogical anger for Sam, Kendra’s initial internal response to her child: “What the fuck’s wrong with you? Like, you’ve got reserved a more privileged place. Why would you want to take that step back?” and Amelia’s “Women are whatever the hell it is that women are.” The experience of unpacking our anger and unraveling it to see the strands of feminism, the logical arguments woven with the strands of indignity and resentment allowed us to move forward. Our newer conceptions of the non-binary nature of gender forced Amelia and I, in particular, to redefine what it meant to be woman.

While I was surprised that I had such a challenge with Sam’s transition in this respect, three other parents shared this experience. Certainly, Amelia did as she struggled with what it meant to be a woman. Kendra was initially repulsed at the thought of her child losing his male privilege. Then Gloria, who said she would more likely be in the “chorus of women that are chanting for women's rights,” was consoled by her child who assured her he would fare better *because* he would transition to male. Amelia evinced underlying anger at the thought of her child transitioning to woman and I resented mine abandoning me for the privileged “other.” These initial thoughts were, no doubt, subconscious but they arose during a moment of crisis, a moment when gender was on the altar, and we only understood gender in terms of a dichotomy. Our reactions signified that gender was “less an identity than a caste position” (Goldberg, 2014, p. 3). Our first reaction was born out of experience, our resistance to hegemonic masculinity. But in many ways, our children pushed us to redefine womanhood in a way that we never could before. What makes a woman? is a question taken up by many of the third-wave and fourth-wave feminists groups who are making room for their transgender sisters. When the dichotomy

vanishes, gender becomes the making of our imagination. It is not on a sliding scale but is a complex and evolving balance of nature, nurture, and culture (Ehrensaft, 2011) and there is much for all of us to learn from each other.

### **Research Question 3: Queering Authenticity**

For the third research question regarding how parents navigated any tensions created when their child rejected gendered norms, I will discuss the motivations that centred parents when tensions arose. Certainly, the motivation shared most often was familial love which necessitated the need to protect, nurture, and guide their children. However, a parent can love their child and still find gender transition to be reckless, immoral, or even repulsive. Another value that the parents of this study shared was authenticity which was discussed in the Findings section. In their book, *Transgender in the Workplace*, Sheridan and Quigley (2019) defined gender authenticity as “the ability to express one’s orientation and identity without fear of coercion to conform to gender stereotypes” (p. 158) yet the definition of gender authenticity has generated a number of iterations through the years. Interestingly, Sheridan and Quigley’s definition leaves open the possibility of non-binary gender expression, a notable improvement upon early arguments around gender and what it meant to be authentic in the transgender community.

#### ***Authenticity as “Passing”***

Earlier discourses of queer and transgender theorists celebrated the transgender body that fell outside the gender binary, was unstable, and thus could not be labeled; they disrupted the dominant social categories by refusing to be neatly boxed (Hines, 2007). Both Sandy Stone’s (1991) “*The Empire Strikes Back: Posttranssexual Manifesto*” and Leslie Feinberg’s (1992) *Transgender Liberation: A Movement Whose Time has Come* urged gender expansive people to liberate themselves from gender “authenticity,” to live outside gender conventions and embody themselves. Yet, authenticity here is defined as “passing” as male or female, or being authentic “enough” to convince your psychiatrist,

endocrinologist, surgeon or legal advisor that you were worthy of the hormones, surgery or legal services. Davy (2010) asserts that “the processes involved in persuading their psychiatrist (gatekeeper) that they were legitimate candidates for hormonal and surgical intervention were viewed as ritualistic, lengthy and patronising” (p. 115). Butler (1993) referred to these gatekeepers as the “medicolegal,” those who had the power to grant access to services essential for passing. Authenticity was defined, therefore, by cisgender people, particularly cisgender professionals with gatekeeping powers.

### *Authenticity Queered*

But just as the terms gay and queer have been reclaimed, some might argue that the word authenticity has been as well for the gender expansive population. This is largely due to the “postmodern discourse on gender that deconstructs the male/female sex binary, and nurtures transgender, transsexual, and genderqueer identities and families” (Lev, 2010, p. 278). The concept of gender (as well as sex, sexuality, and gender expressions) as a binary has been deconstructed such that its complexity is ostensible. The gender binary concept has been dismantled and “authenticity” has been queered. The concept of gender on a spectrum (or a web) has become more fully understood by society at-large, as the participants in this study have demonstrated. Ben shared his wife’s analogy of gender diversity likened to a swimming pool with hypermasculine and hyperfeminine at either end, and people of all varieties of gender swimming anywhere in between. Alina explored the idea of spectrums existing throughout nature, commenting on how we are all likely on the autism scale, for one. Adam shared how the concept of “sex between your legs; gender between your ears” helped him to unravel the two when in life they are too often conflated. These metaphors or visual representations seemed to aid parents in rethinking their understanding of gender, and opening the door to acceptance. “When it comes to issues of gender,” wrote Sheridan and Quigley (2019), “authenticity is about aligning one’s visible, external appearance, attire, and behaviors with a recognizable, deeply felt, and innately understood internal identity. When

such an alignment takes place, the journey to personal integrity in life can be considerably enhanced” (p. 19). The parents in this study appeared to value authenticity, as defined here, to allow their child to discover who they are and then to support their journey to personal integrity in life.

These parents challenge the western metanarrative of the gender binary by encouraging authenticity which is a characteristic of another western metanarrative, individualism. Individualism is a social theory that favours individual voice and action over the collective or group (Davis & Williamson, 2019). For transfamilies, their voices queer the family, defy social norms that reinforce bigenderism, and subsequently disrupt the status quo. Bellah et al. (2007), who wrote the provocative *Habits of the Heart* in 1985, wrote that expressive individualism is when “each person has a unique core of feeling and intuition that should unfold or be expressed if individuality is to be realized” (p. 334). Expressive individualism became widely popularized during the 1960s revolutions that gave voice to minorities (Taylor, 2007; Hagel, 2017) and encouraged the values of self, personal freedom and rights, individual dignity, and private conscience. There is also evidence to suggest that parents born in the 1960s-1970s are more likely to raise children, especially daughters, to value autonomy, independence, individualism, personal gratification, and self-expression (Alwin, 1990). Dawn articulated this value when she recognized the irony of telling her child for 10 years to just be herself and then resisted her transition. It may be that the values encouraged in the metanarrative individualism are emboldening transfamilies to wrestle with genuine authenticity.

The collective narratives of these participants queering authenticity tell a compelling story of personal change and social challenge. Bending, broadening, and breaking gender norms is an emancipatory act, and although parents’ initial quest for understanding may reflect individualistic values, they do join with other advocates for the collective good. These parents not only experienced transformative learning on a personal level, but they were actively emancipating themselves from the

gender norms of Western society while also, as members of society, transforming the gender norms themselves.

## **Summary**

In this chapter I have considered how the participants in this study experienced perspective transformative learning, and most experienced emancipatory biographical praxis, as they worked toward social justice as they challenge the metanarratives of gender and family. Although most parents' own gender identity development did not directly play a significant role in interpreting the gender transition of their child, a parent's own gender frames (Fisk & Ridgeway, 2018) were interrogated and readjusted to reflect their newer understandings of gender. Feminist mothers or those influenced by feminist values may face unique challenges due to a history of resistance to gender hegemony. The concept of authenticity was a notable shared value that arose from the findings and is possibly a reflection of western expressive individualism. The term authenticity has also evolved since the 1980s where queer and transgender theorists sought to defy "authentic" gender that aligned with the binary. Through the last three decades, theorists have deconstructed the gender binary such that gender expansiveness is realized and acknowledged. Thus, gender authenticity is now possible due to postmodern gender paradigms and vocabulary available. By transcending socialization and recognizing its reifying power the parents in this study rejected many of the very norms that molded them.

The following chapter offers a summary and how this study might, from the discipline of adult learning, contribute to TransFamily Theory and Transformative Learning Theory. Finally, I will share some implications for future research and practice.

## Chapter 6: Conclusion and Recommendations

*“Our pastors took a lot of abuse from some homophobic church members who are very vocal about not liking the new, more affirmative position that has transpired right now. Our church has a smaller attendance, we have a smaller budget, and some people are still quite vocal about their disapproval – but it is real.” (Freda, journal)*

From the narratives of 17 parents of gender-expansive children, this study documents a number of findings related to a parent’s ability to support their child through gender transition. The process of supporting one’s child through transition is a learning journey. Butler (2006) wrote that “only by unlearning the rules and losing our ‘expertise,’ do we have a chance of exposing the field of norms and their coercive effects” (p. 533). Many parents initially resist their child’s words or actions that break gendered norms for a variety of reasons, such as fearing transphobic aggression from others. When learning begins, the unlearning begins. This dissertation is about the often-painful process of unlearning and relearning what it means to be gendered. The findings of the study demonstrated how parents’ learning was holistic, a balance of the more personal cognitive and emotional aspects of learning with the social realm. Unlearning involved unpacking stereotypes and analyzing gender frames (Eagly & Wood, 2012; Fisk & Ridgeway, 2018), and meant looking to the past for negative experiences that might inhibit current learning or that made gender a charged topic. When relearning, participants scrutinized the metanarratives of gender and recognized their flaws and limitations. The individualistic value of authenticity gave space for gender expansion, and most parents recognized their ability to challenge and queer social, political, and cultural norms that affected their child’s life.

### Implications for TransFamily Theory

Transfamily theorists (McGuire et al., 2016b) have demonstrated how “having a trans\* family member—raising a trans\* child, having a parent who is trans\*, having a trans\* sibling, spouse,

grandchild, and so on—challenges and expands our theories of gender processes and development within families” (p. 61). In this section, I revisit the interdisciplinary concepts developed in Transfamily theory with the aim of broadening the lens to include adult educational research. After introducing important concepts about unlearning and relearning into Transfamily theory, I also consider how non-binary identities may push Transfamily theory in new directions.

### ***Unlearning Gender***

In "Boys will be girls, girls will be boys: Children affect parents as parents affect children in gender nonconformity", Ehrensaft (2011) contended that parents of gender-expansive children “need to go through our own process of self-reflection and scrutiny of our own biases and feelings about children and youth who go against the gender grain” (p. 547). This dissertation has delved into the holistic process of parents unlearning gender (Butler, 2006; de Palma, 2013; Ehrensaft, 2011) in order to relearn gender. When a child expresses their gender beyond the binary, explores ideas of gender, or chooses to transition from their assigned gender, many parents begin the process of exploration within themselves. This exploration can be visualized as a balance of cognitive and emotional processing which intersects with social learning (Illeris, 2018; see Figure 7 below).

In general, the early days of unlearning can be filled with heightened emotions that can drive a parent to gather information through the Internet, books, friends, and support group members, as well as their child. In this early phase, a parent reanalyzes the gender frames and gender roles that they learned as a child and that were reinforced through their youth (Eagly & Wood, 2012; Fisk & Ridgeway, 2018). They may experience feelings of loss or ambiguous loss (Boss, 1999), and much of their healing will derive from the analysis of these gender frames, as it is not their child that is gone, but the “idea” of a daughter or son. As it is not uncommon to resort to stereotypes when faced with new situations that challenge older belief systems (Fisk & Ridgeway, 2018), gender frames built on stereotypes are also



reanalysed. Moreover, as this is a time when conflicting values emerge, parents often reappraise their values to determine whether conflicting values can actually coexist or if they need to reconsider their priorities. Role models in the unlearning phase are especially important. These include parents who have been through the unlearning/relearning process and gender-expansive children who have transitioned well and seem happy.

A number of aspects of unlearning can hold a parent back. These might include any negative experience that is connected to gender that has been left unresolved. In this study, parents with a history of rape or incest suggested that if they had not had therapy, their understanding of sex and gender would have remained conflated, and accepting their child's gender transition would have been difficult. Experiences with toxic masculinity can also be troublesome if a parent's gender frame for "manhood" cannot tolerate detecting femininity in their son (Harrison & Michelson, 2019). A third surprising example arose around feminism, particularly if a mother grew up during the time of consciousness-raising second-wave feminism. For some women, their child's transition unearthed resentments around gender that she did not realize were there. This, again, required parents to reexplore gender frames that no longer functioned.

### ***Relearning Gender***

Reconstruction in learning is, again, the process of affective, cognitive, and social dimensions working together. Values are usually what keep parents focused and strong, and love is certainly central in their journey. Authenticity was found to be a second central value for all the parents in this study, whether they realized that despite transition their child was still the same person, or that being oneself was more important than satisfying the status quo. I argued in the Discussion that authenticity is a value that comes out of expressive individualism, a Western metanarrative (Taylor, 2007; Hagel, 2017) that in many ways arms parents against traditional metanarratives of gender. As parents relearn gender as a

spectrum, or as a three-dimensional web weaved of nature, nurture, and culture (Ehrensaft, 2011), many move into the “emancipatory biographical praxis” stage of learning and begin questioning the metanarrative of gender. The social aspects of learning as a support system widen into society as they begin challenging the systems within it. After perspective transformation (Mezirow, 1981), many parents actively engage in emancipatory praxis (Hoggan et al., 2017), challenging themselves and queering societal norms.

### ***Exploring Nonbinary Identity***

Categorization is central to how humans organize and understand the world. I wrote in the Discussion section on Queering Authenticity that it is customary to uphold tacit agreements about social norms to allow for order or to prevent anxiety induced when one does not know what to expect (Ewert, 1991). Amelia expressed her frustration as she waited for her child to decide whether to transition to female or remain gender-fluid. Remy and Sofia admitted that they did not understand what non-binary was, and as for me, until I came to terms with what it meant for my child to be gender-queer, my ability to be supportive was immobilized. I struggled with what gender-queer looked like in today’s society and where Sam would belong. Children who are non-binary defy the traditional categories of gender, and this was particularly challenging for parents who could not imagine a world without structure.

Although “passing” has been the goal for many binary transgender people, the three children in my study who were non-binary did not share this aim. Rather, Remy and Sofia’s child identified as non-binary at the time of the interviews, Amelia and Martin’s child identified as gender-fluid, and my child was gender-queer. In all three cases, parents expressed a sense of being unsettled about gender and living in a state of ambiguity. In McGuire et al.’s (2016a) article on ambiguous loss, they discussed the ambiguity family members often experienced during gender transition. For parents of non-binary children, this period of ambiguity can be extended as they come to terms with “losing” their son or

daughter, but not knowing who they were regaining. Grappling with this relatively novel concept of non-binary gender can induce anxiety in parents as they have difficulty biographicizing a concept that has not to this point fit into their worldview. When Amelia saw the photograph of Vivek Shraya, she could finally visualize how blending gender could be positive, joyful, and beautiful.

Our non-binary children have defied the binary categories that have formed the foundation of Western gender metanarratives (Lyotard, 1979/1984). No longer interested in “passing”, those who identify as non-binary visualize the world where gender lines and social categories are blurred. Indeed, a steady increase of individuals who identify as non-binary have come out in recent years and are living authentically, and the gender spectrum is thickening at the midpoint (Goldberg & Kuvalanka, 2018; Meadow, 2016). The fact that freedom from the constrictions of gender categories enables more people to live authentically in the middle of the spectrum suggests that gender variance may be underdocumented in traditional gender identity development theories. Still, until this diversity becomes more visible in Western society, parents who choose to be supportive of their child are creating a brave space for other parents to follow. It is here where they biographicize or integrate newer understandings of gender. Once parents in my study experienced learning that was truly transformative, they were prepared to publicly protect and advocate for their child. I referred to stereotypes as the Trojan Horse in the Findings section, and I saw these parents breaking down the stereotypes and emerging from the horse ready to do battle against the legal, medical, political, and educational systems that reinforce social metanarratives. Quite often, as seen in this study, eliminating oppression and fighting for social justice becomes a moral or ethical obligation (Yacek & Ijaz, 2020). Parents who may have been reluctant to raise their voices initially will do so in order to ensure that their child lives authentically, in safety, and in a world with fewer categories to restrict them.

Transfamily theory explores how a gender-expansive family member can challenge our thinking about the nature of gender. In this study, I have investigated the learning process a parent experiences, and have found that many unlearn and then relearn gender frames (Fisk & Ridgeway, 2018) in the process of perspective transformation (Mezirow, 1981) and emancipatory praxis (Hoggan et al., 2017). This learning process is holistic (Illeris, 2018), involving the cognitive and affective aspects of learning working together with social ones. Learning can stall if even one of these three domains of learning is overwhelmed, and parents of gender-binary children may linger in the unlearning/relearning process as they seek role models and understanding of what it means to be non-binary. Lastly, as more non-binary children are identified, some premises of gender-developmental theories should be reevaluated, such as Kohlberg's concept of Gender Stability and Gender Constancy.

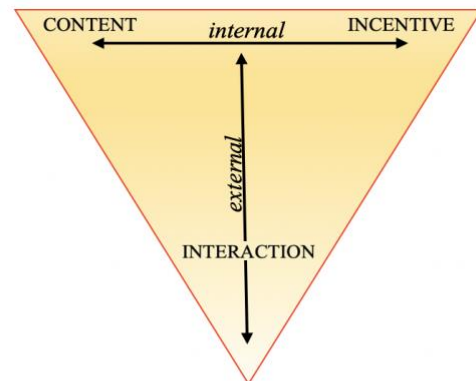
### Implications for Transformative Learning Theory

One of the most significant findings of this study was the documentation of parents' perspective

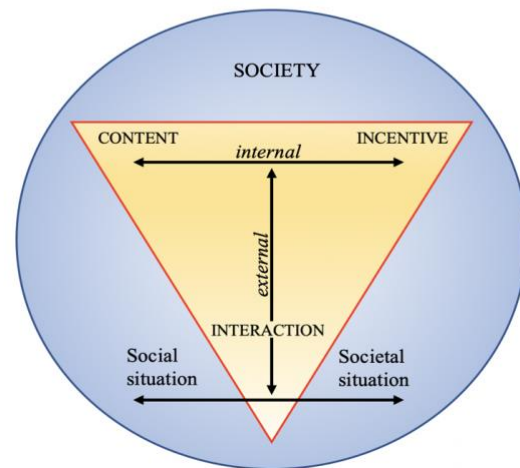
**Figure 7**

*Perspective Transformation (phase 1) and Emancipatory Biographical Praxis (phase 2)*

Phase 1.



Phase 2.



*Note.* Adapted from *How we Learn: Learning and non-learning in school and beyond* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed., p. 93), by K. Illeris, 2017. Routledge. Copyright 2017 by Knud Illeris.

transformation and praxis. As a parent worked through the emotional and intellectual transformation (Mezirow, 1978) of reconciling older conceptualizations of gender with newer ones, they bumped up against societal metanarratives (Lyotard, 1979/1984) that were not only inconsistent with their newer understandings of the complexity of gender, but oppressive to them. This study on the learning processes of parents demonstrated that many parents experienced a two-phase transformation (see Figure 7), a deeply personal perspective transformation and then an emancipatory biographical praxis as they recognized that the metanarrative of the gender binary not only denies the authenticity of their gender-expansive child, but also sustains an illusion that males and females are opposing creatures when in fact they are intricately more complicated and connected. Not only this, but transition is never a private experience; transition is a public venture that affects all those associated with the child who transitions—teachers, friends and their parents, extended family, or coaches. Because these people may not have much experience with gender variance, they often look to the parent for direction or even affirmation. In this respect, the findings of this study suggest that the two-phase transformative learning of parents has the potential to be a powerful force in reducing stigma and normalizing gender variance, thereby promoting inclusivity.

The participants in this study experienced a need to take action once they realized the implications of their newly attained knowledge and their responsibility to challenge social institutions. In their article, “Developing the theory of perspective transformation: Continuity, intersubjectivity, and emancipatory praxis”, Hoggan et al. (2017) posited that the aspects of social change within Mezirow’s (1978) transformative learning theory are grossly undertheorized. They then introduced three concepts tied to perspective transformation that bridge reflection and action in transformative learning. Their third concept, Emancipatory Praxis, broached a debate in adult learning on whether praxis, especially action related to social justice, necessarily follows perspective transformation. The authors contended, and I

would agree, that perspective transformation has traditionally been an individual experience in Mezirow's theorization and that this experience may or may not lead to social action. Unlike Freire's (1970) sociocultural approach, which essentially leads to social change, Mezirow's approach may be a reflection of the Western culture of individualism within a highly fluid modern society (Alheit & Dausien, 2000; Beck, 1992).

Hoggan et al. (2017) suggested that perspective transformation can lead to the following degrees of praxis: "(a) reflexively adaptive learning, (b) emancipatory forms of praxis which occur on a biographical level, and (c) those types of praxis capable of effecting emancipatory institutional and social change" (p. 60). Hoggan et al.'s (2017) second and third pathways demonstrate varying levels of praxis for emancipatory purposes that could also apply to other studies of transformative learning. Many of my participants experienced: 1) perspective transformation (Mezirow, 1981); 2) emancipatory biographical praxis (Hoggan, et al., 2017); and 3) the uncomfortable liminal space between as they gather the courage and conviction to cross from perspective to praxis. By adopting this terminology and breaking the transformative learning process into two stages, processes which may be messy and at times disordered, future researchers could examine each stage (and their sub-stages) more systematically.

### **Implications for Future Research**

The concept of authenticity is a curious concept because it is a social construct (Yuan et al., 2014). I have suggested here that the term has been queered to accommodate people of all genders, as opposed to its earlier usage by cisgender professionals as an objective measure of gender duality. This would reflect "objective authenticity" (Yuan et al., 2014) as opposed to today's "existential authenticity" (Yuan et al., 2014) wherein "being in touch with one's inner self, knowing one's self, having a sense of one's own identity and then living in accord with one's sense of one's self is being authentic" (Steiner &

Reisinger, 2006, p. 300). In this sense, true authenticity stretches the boundaries of the gender dichotomy to reveal a vibrant spectrum of gender expression, and further research on parents who have not embraced this concept of authenticity would be informative. The volunteers for this study were recruited through local support groups, and each parent shared their challenges and eventual commitment to the support of their child, and so it would be illuminating to also study the learning trajectories of parents who chose not to be supportive of their child's wish to transition socially. Although they may indeed love their child, their narratives would shed light on their cognitive and affective processes and how they differed from those reflected in this study.

There are numerous other questions which also deserve attention; for example, while authenticity appeared to be at the heart of many of the parents' narratives, how do the narratives differ for non-supportive parents? What were their definitions of authenticity, and what values are prioritized ahead of it? Was there tension between their ideas of authenticity and their commitments to a religious or cultural belief system that does not accommodate gender non-conformity? In what ways were their reasonings based on cognitive and affective processes or religious or cultural paradigms? Looking to Illeris's Domains of Learning model and the trajectories of the learning processes of the participants in this study, where would be the point(s) of departure for non-supportive parents? Finally, do some non-supportive parents hold ambivalent feelings about their child, finding themselves torn between wanting to be supportive but also wanting to maintain their cherished religious or cultural belief systems?

It might also be revealing to conduct a study on the evolution of parental transformative learning experiences through the decades. This would include parents like myself and Freda, who began our journeys prior to the APA's move to depathologize transgenderism in 2013. Our experiences differed somewhat than those of the other participants in this study because when our children came out, the language was insufficient to fully describe their experiences, and many were grappling with the concept

of non-binary. Since then, the lexicon for gender variance has bloomed, the conception of a gender spectrum has been fleshed out, and professionals are working in a multidisciplinary fashion toward the wellness of their gender-expansive clients. Meadow (2016) shared Beemyn and Rankin's 2011 study, in which individuals who were gender-non-binary were allowed to self-identify. They noted that the term cross-dresser, while still in use, was less likely to be self-selected among participants under the age of 32 (in 2011) than those over 32. Also, a notable number of participants under 32 self-identified as gender-queer, whereas none over 32 did. So, what do these shifts in language reveal about today's social climate, and do these shifts suggest that the parent's journey might be easier if indeed the social climate is becoming less hostile toward gender-expansive people? A study of parents' transformative experiences as they evolve with and against the socio/cultural/political climate in Canada might reveal an interconnection between terminology development (e.g. gender-queer, non-binary, or gender-neutral), metaphor usage (such as the gender spectrum or gender web), parental support approaches (or lack thereof), and the context of history that could suggest future support systems for parents of gender-expansive children. It appears that both Western society as a whole and gender-expansive members within it are broadening their conceptualizations about gender (Akin, 2019; Beemyn & Rankin, 2011; Meadow, 2016). If families are indeed becoming more open to change, then we would benefit from research that documents how gender identity development reflects this change and the implications of a future where society no longer defines gender by two categories.

### **Implications for Practice**

A parent who has knowledge, emotional clarity and inner strength, and a social support system in place is better prepared to support a gender-expansive child than one who is confused, fearful, and feeling alone in their situation. The purpose of this section is to suggest support systems for parents to identify their "black holes", recognize the values that will ground them, and assist them in challenging



the status quo, which a parent of a gender-expansive child will eventually do. Until the gender frames within Canadian society have shifted to the point that gender transition is the norm, supporting a gender-expansive child will ultimately be disruptive.

Support systems in Canada have grown to include dedicated professionals in medicine, including mental health, law, and education. Support centres in urban areas offer counselling, support groups for parents, children, and family members, and education programs for schools and businesses. They can direct a parent to doctors, websites with information regarding name/gender changes, mental health support, and legal counsel if needed. The growth of these support centres has been phenomenal, and families are in good hands. The further from these epicenters one goes, however, the less public support parents can receive. Support groups online offer information and emotional comfort for parents living outside cities, but this is not enough. Perhaps the increased use of online support group meetings might offer the opportunity for a more personal connection for parents who lack the social support they need.

In Canada, the Canadian Professional Association for Transgender Health (CPATH) conference for health care professionals is offered every second year, and in British Columbia, for activists and researchers, the University of Victoria hosts the annual Moving Trans History Forward conference. There are also a number of smaller conferences for gender-expansive youth and adults. What is missing, however, is a comprehensive conference for parents and family members. When I was new to this journey in 2011, I attended the three-day Philadelphia Trans Health (now Wellness) Conference where sessions were offered to parents and gender-expansive family members on a broad array of subjects, including intersectional topics, transgender and disabilities, spirituality, and self-care and wellness. Professional conference sessions were offered in medicine, legal, and behavioral health. In 2014, Catherine Hyde (2020) worked with the PFLAG team in Baltimore and reached out to PFLAG New York City to establish a similar conference, Gender Conference East, a two-day event. Friday was

dedicated to professionals, and Saturday was for families. Again, these days were filled with information, resources, and connections. Most of all, it was powerful to see hundreds of people who may walk different paths but were still on the same mountain, advocates for their children who had the courage to be themselves. This is a need in Canada, a conference that is accessible for those across our broad country, perhaps rotating host cities, and certainly one that would enrich family and professionals alike.

Finally, as an emic/etic researcher and one who is a member of the community under study, there are personal implications. In their article on forms of transformative education, Yacek and Ijaz (2020) proposed a substantivist approach to education because transformative experiences can be traumatic, as this study has demonstrated. Because of this, I feel it my ethical responsibility to not only share my findings with the academic community, but also to provide a way to mitigate the trauma in the lives of future trans-parents. Yacek and Ijaz (2020) suggested two strategies from Charles Taylor's (1989) philosophy of language to alleviate the trauma and tension that arise before, during, and following a significant paradigm shift such as gender-expansion and its implications for children in a cisnormative world. One strategy is the process of *articulation*, or when "the learner comes to re-narrate her life story through new categories of experience" (Yacek & Ijaz, 2020, p. 126) and to provide resources for re-narrating their life experiences, such as autobiographies or guest speakers who serve as role models. The second strategy follows the first, in that *aspiration* is when "the learner recognises the value of these new categories and strives to realise their ethical implications in his or her life" (Yacek & Ijaz, 2020, p. 126). As part of my own ethical transformation, I intend to write a book that will allow parents or support groups to apply the principals of substantivist transformative learning through applying the findings of this study and other related studies in order to assist them in the articulation and aspiration processes. I was surprised that 9 out of 16 of my participants chose to write in the journal provided for

them. Additionally, when I arrived for their first interview, they were ready to talk and I did not need to “warm them up”, as expected. I, too, learned much through my writing, and I was able to begin a healing process. Since this topic is close to the heart for parents, and since the participants were eager to share and learn, this book would be one tool to aid them in working through the cognitive dissonance often associated with this experience, and it would be one way for me to give back to a community that has sustained me.

## **Conclusion**

I wish to highlight in this conclusion the findings of this study, but also to tie them to the personal narratives that enlightened them. Two parents, Savannah and Kendra, made it a point to remind me that this journey is about the child, not the parent, and my own son, Sam, reinforced this point. Certainly, a parent who commandeers their child’s journey can wreak havoc on a family trying to make meaning of the situation. I have found, however, that the more knowledge people have on entering into a challenging situation, the more tools they will have to draw upon to work through it. This is also heart work. Freda and Kendra both admitted that they did much work within themselves through counselling, and this allowed them to put their children first when she needed them. But not all parents have this opportunity, and I was one of these. My own frustration with gender impeded me to a point in my role of supportive parent, but I had no idea why I felt the way I did, or how to heal. As I witnessed Dawn and Amelia’s epiphanies through journal-writing and conversations, it reinforced my own conviction that writing can facilitate learning by helping one work through contradictions and obscurity, and to bridge older understandings with new ones. It was through writing an educational biography for a graduate class that I unearthed the deep anger I harboured for the gender norms in the church I attended until I was 29 and the society to which I belong. It is vital for some parents to attend to their own needs in order

to be the supportive parent they want to be. I engaged in this work to prevent hijacking, , not to encourage it.

Other parents did not have this need to work through black holes in their lives, and had already established the values they would need to be supportive. There is a sifting of values that needs to be done, however, and that takes place in the mind, heart, and within one's social circles of support. This research demonstrated the inner workings of the cognitive, affective, and social regions, working in tandem to gain understanding, work through tension, and gain peace of mind. There are common sites parents visited along this journey, as evidenced from the triple cycle of working through mind and heart and working with others during holistic learning. These can be signposts for parents to follow as they follow their own paths on a familiar mountain.

Finally, these parents exude moral courage. They not only made the commitment privately to be supportive of their children, but they actively engaged in rising above and battling the social norms around gender expectations as well as the laws that reinforce them. These parents are pioneers who combat the stigma surrounding gender, and they work for a more inclusive society. Freda wrote in her journal of the abuse the pastors took when they allowed church members to share their trans-family experiences. Despite a smaller congregation and budget, supportive church members and leaders stood by their decision. The narratives my participants and I have shared in this project are collective testimony that people can change, whether it be in the church house, on the schoolyard, in a court of law, or within the home. Ewert (1991) asserted that "Underlying the process of critique in the concept that existing social structures and beliefs are socially constructed and therefore changeable through social action. Critical theory is identified by an emphasis on emancipation that requires both enlightenment and action" (p. 346). This dissertation was written in this spirit: to better understand the journey parents

embark on when challenging old gender frames, to amplify the voices of those who reject traditional gendered social structures, and to create an inclusive society where we can all live authentically.

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## Appendix A: Letter of Introduction to LGBT Support Centres



UNIVERSITY OF  
CALGARY

### Email Letter of Initial Contact for Support Group Directors

Dear \_\_\_\_\_,

My name is Elizabeth McNeilly and I am a doctoral student at University of Calgary who is engaging in research that I believe might be of interest to you. This study aims *to better understand the learning and experiences of parents of transgender, gender non-conforming, and two-spirit children*. The research will explore a parent's own experience with gender in their personal history and their experience developing newer understandings of gender identity.

From 2013 to 2015, I was a Parents, Friends, and Families of Gays and Lesbians (PFLAG) support group leader for parents of children who fell under the transgender umbrella. I held this responsibility because of my own experience as a parent of a transgender child who came out to me in 2011. The road for parents can be challenging and I always felt there ought to be more to help parents navigate their own journey. As good parents, we learn all we can to support our child but we often struggle personally. Support groups such as yours truly help parents navigate this time period by offering rich resources, a place to connect with others, and a place where parents can see role models of what parenting a gender-expansive child looks like.

But there is a missing piece. Much of the literature is about supporting the child in transition. This is most important, and yet I see my research similar to the flight attendant who asks parents to put the oxygen mask on themselves first before placing it on their child. My research aims to understand the experience of parents—the losses, the guilt, the fear, and the strong feelings of discomfort or disgust parents often have but are too ashamed to admit. All of these feelings are part of the learning journey for parents and by studying the experience systematically, we will in the future help parents along their personal journey by providing more information on what gender transition means for them personally. Then, they can be stronger parents for their child.

I have attached a copy of the Letter of Invitation that includes more of the details of the study. Ultimately, I hope to briefly introduce the study at the beginning of a parent support group meeting and then leave copies of the Letter of Invitation with those in attendance. I would also ask that this Letter of Invitation be emailed to your parents so those who are absent will have the opportunity to share their experiences with me. Please let me know if you are interested in working with me. It is through studies such as this that we learn more about how we can be more supportive to our parents of gender-expansive children.

Sincerely,  
Elizabeth McNeilly

## Appendix B: Letter of Introduction to Potential Participants

Elizabeth McNeilly  
PhD Candidate  
Werklund School of Education  
[elizabeth.mcneilly@ucalgary.ca](mailto:elizabeth.mcneilly@ucalgary.ca)  
410.370.6812  
Catherine Burwell, PhD, Supervisor



### **Re: Parents of Transgender, Gender Non-Conforming, or Two-Spirit Children Study**

Dear Parent or Primary Caregiver,

I am writing to let you know about an opportunity to participate in a research study that aims to better understand the learning and experiences of parents of transgender, gender non-conforming, and two-spirit children. This study takes a look at the parents' own experience with gender in their personal history and explores how parents process newer understandings of gender identity.

*In 2011, I was in your shoes. For my experience, I traveled a rocky road that I only managed because I love my child. Later, I became a support group leader. But through it all, I felt that there needed to be more information on parents and what we were going through, in addition to what our child was going through. This study is my quest to learn about the parent's experience. I believe that the more we understand as a parent, the better we can help our child.*

This research has the potential benefit of providing you with the opportunity to gain a better understanding of your own gender education which may help you recognize how you interpret your own child's transition. Also, we will explore the common tensions that exist within a family and this may help you manage those tensions better. There is also the potential benefit of simply sharing this experience with someone else who has had a similar experience, for I have also traveled this road. Although the potential exists for a participant to feel some distress during the interview, for many parents of children in transition, this study may be both helpful and encouraging. What is learned from this study will ultimately help future parents who share your experiences whether you are struggling with the situation or not.

This study will be divided into three interviews, each one falling within a two week period. Because of this, scheduling is flexible. You can expect each interview to be 60-90 minutes in length, your identity will be kept confidential, and you may choose a pseudonym for yourself and family members. At the completion of the study, you will receive a token of appreciation in the form of a \$25 gift card. This study is completely voluntary on your part and at any time, you have the right to stop the interview or withdraw from the study.

If you would like additional information about this study, please email me at [elizabeth.mcneilly@ucalgary.ca](mailto:elizabeth.mcneilly@ucalgary.ca) or call/text me at 410.370.6812. Of course, agreement to be

contacted or a request for more information does not obligate you to participate in any study. After we have communicated, you can decide if you would like to participate in this study.

Thank you for considering this research opportunity and I hope to hear from you.

Sincerely,

Elizabeth McNeilly

**REB Certification - REB18-1754**

The University of Calgary Conjoint Faculties Research Ethics Board has approved this research study.

## Appendix C: Informed Consent Form



Elizabeth McNeilly, MA  
PhD Candidate  
Catherine Burwell, Supervisor  
Werklund School of Education  
Curriculum & Instruction  
[elizabeth.mcneilly@ucalgary.ca](mailto:elizabeth.mcneilly@ucalgary.ca)  
410.370.6812

### **Parents of Transgender, Gender Non-Conforming, or Two-Spirit Children Study**

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This consent form, a copy of which has been given to you, is only part of the process of informed consent. If you want more details about something mentioned here, or information not included here, you should feel free to ask. Please take the time to read this carefully and to understand any accompanying information.

The University of Calgary Conjoint Faculties Research Ethics Board has approved this research study. Participation is completely voluntary and confidential. Your name will be kept confidential and you may choose a pseudonym if you like or one will be assigned to you.

#### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this research is to better understand the learning and experiences of parents of transgender, gender non-conforming, and two-spirit children. This study takes a look at the parents' own experience with gender in their personal history, how parents process newer understandings of gender identity, and how they work with tensions in the family.

#### **Study Procedures**

For this study, you will participate in 3 interviews and your responses will be recorded. The interview materials will be kept in a locked cabinet only accessible by Elizabeth McNeilly until after transcription and anonymization. At that point, Elizabeth McNeilly will store the interview materials and transcripts in an encrypted folder on the University of Calgary's secure server. The audio recordings will be permanently deleted after transcription is completed.

You will also be asked to draw a family tree to spark discussion of your own gender education. You will be given a journal and will be asked to record at least twice or you will have the opportunity to respond in other artistic ways, such as drawing a picture, composing a poem or song, or making a collage. Please do not use photographs if you choose this option. With your permission, I will keep *copies* of both the family tree and the journal or creative piece for analysis but you will retain the original work. I may need to contact you via email to receive clarification after the interviews are complete. Should I do so, I will keep a copy of the email in the encrypted folder on the university's secure server. All emails will be permanently deleted.

Use of this data for research purposes is voluntary. Your participation will only be known to me and I will keep your identity confidential. Your name will be kept confidential (you may choose a pseudonym if you like), and you may withdraw from the research study at any time by simply contacting me in person or at the email or phone number provided. If you have any questions or concerns related to the study, I would encourage you to contact me directly.

### **Risks or Benefits**

I see the participation in this project as low risk although it is possible that some of the conversations could be emotional. If you feel distressed, please let me know and we can pause or stop the interview. I also have a list of support groups, professionals, and institutions that you can contact. I will also do all within my power to keep your identity confidential. There is, however, due to the small population of parents of transgender, gender non-conforming and two-spirit children the slight possibility that someone could identify you. This is unlikely as your name, identifying information, and the names of your family members will not be revealed.

As for benefits, this research may provide participants the opportunity to gain a better understanding of their own gender education and this may help some parents recognize why they are struggling with their child's transition. Also, we will explore the common tensions that exist within a family and this may help parents manage those tensions better. There is also the potential benefit of simply sharing this experience with someone else who has had a similar experience. For many parents of children in transition, this study may be both helpful and encouraging. The purpose of this study is to better understand the experience of parents of gender diverse children, and what we learn here will ultimately benefit future parents in your shoes.

### **Dissemination of Findings**

Study findings will be summarized in the researcher's doctoral thesis. Research findings may also be published in academic journals and may be presented at local, provincial, national or international conferences for the purpose of sharing what has been learned about parents' experiences of processing gender transition

### **Personal Information**

Some personal identifying information will be collected in this study and all participant identities will remain confidential with pseudonyms. I will be audio recording the interviews for transcription purposes, and you can have access to the recordings if requested.

There are several options for you to consider if you decide to take part in this research. Please review each of these options and choose Yes or No:

I grant permission to be audio recorded: Yes: \_\_\_\_ No: \_\_\_\_

I wish my identity to remain confidential, but you may refer to me by a pseudonym: Yes: \_\_\_\_ No: \_\_\_\_

The pseudonym I choose for myself is: \_\_\_\_\_

Any material created by me (such as the journal) may be used in this study: Yes: \_\_\_\_ No: \_\_\_\_

Any material created by me may be used if I give permission after creating it by signing and dating each piece: Yes: \_\_\_\_ No: \_\_\_\_

Copies of your journal or original work and the audio recording device will be locked in my filing cabinet at the university. All copies of emails where we discuss an interview question, consent forms, digital copies of journals and original works, interview transcripts and copies of your original work will be stored in an encrypted folder on the University of Calgary's secure server. Participants are free to withdraw from the study up to one month after the final interview. In the case that a participant withdraws from the study, all data the participant contributed to the study will be destroyed.

When interviews are completed and copies of the journals or created works are collected, you will receive a token of appreciation in the form of a \$25 gift card plus any reimbursement of parking fees should there be any.

You will be consulted to set up a time and date for the interviews.

### **Communication**

To ensure clear communication, please provide me with your phone number and email address. I will use this information to set up interview times, send reminders, and verify information.

Phone: \_\_\_\_\_ Email: \_\_\_\_\_

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### **Signatures – Written consent**

Your signature on this form indicates that 1) you understand to your satisfaction the information provided to you about your participation in this research project, and 2) you agree to participate in the research project.

In no way does this waive your legal rights nor release the investigators, sponsors, or involved institutions from their legal and professional responsibilities. You are free to withdraw from this research project at any time. You should feel free to ask for clarification or new information throughout your participation.

Participant's Name: (please print) \_\_\_\_\_

Participant's Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Researcher's Name: (please print) \_\_\_\_\_

Researcher's Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

### **Questions/ Concerns**

If you have any further questions or want clarification regarding this research and/ or participation, please contact:

Elizabeth McNeilly  
elizabeth.mcneilly@ucalgary.ca  
410.370.6812

If you have any concerns about the way you have been treated as a participant, please contact the Research Ethics Analyst, Research Services, University of Calgary at 403.220.6289 or 403.220.8640; e-mail [cfreb@ucalgary.ca](mailto:cfreb@ucalgary.ca). A copy of this consent form will be given to you to keep for your records and reference. The investigator will keep a copy of the consent form.

### **REB Certification - REB18-1754**

The University of Calgary Conjoint Faculties Research Ethics Board has approved this research study.



## Appendix D: Informed Consent Form Autoethnography



UNIVERSITY OF  
CALGARY

Elizabeth McNeilly, MA  
PhD Candidate  
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Parents of Transgender, Gender Non-Conforming, or Two-Spirit Children Study  
Autoethnography Portion—Consent Form for Researcher's Child

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This consent form, a copy of which has been given to you, is only part of the process of informed consent. If you want more details about something mentioned here, or information not included here, you should feel free to ask. Please take the time to read this carefully and to understand any accompanying information.

The University of Calgary Conjoint Faculties Research Ethics Board has approved this research study. Participation is completely voluntary and confidential. Your name will be kept confidential and you may choose a pseudonym if you like or one will be assigned to you.

### Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this research is to better understand the learning and experiences of parents of transgender, gender non-conforming, and two-spirit children. This study takes a look at the parents' own experience with gender in their personal history, how parents process newer understandings of gender identity, and how they work with tensions in the family. I have included a copy of the welcome letter for you to review.

### Study Procedures

For this study, in addition to participant interviews, the researcher will be writing some autoethnographic work of which you, the researcher's child, would be referred to with a pseudonym. In the autoethnographic portion of the study, I will revisit experiences regarding gender, transition, and tension created within the family. These experiences may include the first years of transition but may also include reflections on you today. The questions I explore may parallel those used with the participants in the study. I have included a copy of these questions for you at the end of this consent form. Should you consent to be part of this study indirectly, you will be ensured *process consent*, such that at multiple points in the study, you will have the opportunity and the right to read this



autoethnographic work and to request portions be revised or removed. I will store the autoethnographic work in an encrypted folder on the University of Calgary's secure server.

Use of this data for research purposes is voluntary. Your participation will only be known to me and I will do what I can to keep your identity confidential. Your name will be kept confidential (you may choose the pseudonym if you like), and you may withdraw from the research study at any time by simply contacting me in person or at the email or phone number provided. If you have any questions or concerns related to the study, I would encourage you to contact me directly.

### **Risks or Benefits**

I will do all within my power to keep your identity confidential, however, due to the fact that my name will be identified and the name of the university, the possibility exists that someone could identify you even though your surname differs from mine. You should be aware that there is a *high risk* of being identified in this study despite my attempts to keep your identity confidential. To this end, you may withdraw from the research study at any time by simply contacting me and all autoethnographic work that pertains to you will be permanently removed from the data. If you have any questions or concerns related to the study, please contact me directly.

As for benefits, the purpose of this study is to better understand the experience of parents of gender diverse children, and the researcher's story will contribute to that understanding. What is learned here will ultimately benefit many future parents and their children.

### **Dissemination of Findings**

Study findings will be summarized in the researcher's doctoral thesis. Research findings may also be published in academic journals and may be presented at local, provincial, national, and international conferences for the purpose of sharing what has been learned about the parent's experience of processing gender transition.

### **Personal Information**

Please review each of these options and choose Yes or No:

I wish my identity to remain confidential, but you may refer to me by a pseudonym: Yes: \_\_\_\_ No: \_\_\_\_

The pseudonym I choose for myself is: \_\_\_\_\_

### **Signatures – Written consent**

Your signature on this form indicates that 1) you understand to your satisfaction the information provided to you about your participation in this research project, and 2) you agree to participate in the research project.

In no way does this waive your legal rights nor release the investigators, sponsors, or involved institutions from their legal and professional responsibilities. You are free to withdraw from this research project at any time. You should feel free to ask for clarification or new information throughout your participation.

Participant's Name: (please print) \_\_\_\_\_

Participant's Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Researcher's Name: (please print) \_\_\_\_\_

Researcher's Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

You are free to withdraw from the study up to one month after the final interview of the study. In the case that you withdraw from the study, all autoethnographic work that pertains to you will be permanently removed from the data. When interviews are completed and the journals or creative works are copied, you will receive a token of appreciation in the form of a \$25 gift card.

### **Questions/ Concerns**

If you have any further questions or want clarification regarding this research and/ or participation, please contact Elizabeth McNeilly, [elizabeth.mcneilly@ucalgary.ca](mailto:elizabeth.mcneilly@ucalgary.ca), 410.370.6812. If you have any concerns about the way you have been treated as a participant, please contact the Research Ethics Analyst, Research Services, University of Calgary at 403.220.6289 or 403.220.8640; e-mail [cfreb@ucalgary.ca](mailto:cfreb@ucalgary.ca). A copy of this consent form has been given to you to keep for your records and reference. The investigator has kept a copy of the consent form.

### **REB Certification - REB18-1754**

The University of Calgary Conjoint Faculties Research Ethics Board has approved this research study.

## Appendix E: Biographical questionnaire



### Biographical Questionnaire

Please take some time to complete this questionnaire. All information given will be treated as **strictly confidential** and will only be reported on when collated.

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*Please answer the questions below by placing an X in the appropriate box or filling in the blank.*

1. Your chosen pseudonym: \_\_\_\_\_
2. Gender:      ☐ M                      ☐ F                      ☐ Prefer not to disclose                      ☐ You don't  
have an option that applies to me. I identify as \_\_\_\_\_.
3. Age:                      \_\_\_\_\_
4. Home Language(s): \_\_\_\_\_
5. Race and/or ethnicity: \_\_\_\_\_
6. Where were you born and where did you grow up? \_\_\_\_\_
7. Where do you see your family in Canada's socioeconomic landscape?
  - ☐ Upper class
  - ☐ Upper middle class
  - ☐ Middle class
  - ☐ Lower middle class
  - ☐ Working class
  - ☐ Working poor
  - ☐ Poverty level

8. What is your relationship to your child (e.g. parent, stepparent)  
\_\_\_\_\_
9. With regard to gender, how does your child identify themselves? \_\_\_\_\_
10. How long ago did you discover this about your child? \_\_\_\_\_

**REB Certification - REB18-1754**

The University of Calgary Conjoint Faculties Research Ethics Board has approved this research study.