Transitioning Meanings? Family Members’ Communicative Struggles Surrounding Transgender Identity

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With the growing number of transgender individuals coming forward, it is important that scholars turn attention to the experiences of these identities and transitions for transgender persons and their families. The present study used a relational dialectics approach to analyze communication of family members (both transgender and not) about transgender identity and transition via online postings to discussion forums. Results showed three sites of struggle present for family members and partners, as well as transgender persons: Presence vs. Absence, Sameness vs. Difference, and Self vs. Other. The presence-absence and sameness-difference struggles centered on family members’ and partners’ experiences with grief surrounding the transgender person’s transition process and the self-other struggle was centered on the issue of support. The tensions illustrated in the data, and especially the experience of loss, indicate that family members and spouses/partners of transgender persons may struggle with meaning-making surrounding a transition in sex and/or gender identity. This struggle over meaning suggests that sex and gender are fundamental to the ways in which we conceptualize and interact with relational partners and that when they change, we may conceptualize and relate to partners/relatives differently.

INTRODUCTION

Transgender (TG) and transsexual identities may not be as rare as once thought by the medical community. New estimations have emerged to suggest greater prevalence of a variety of gender identities. The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM-IV) views transgender identity as a form of Gender Identity Disorder (GID), defined as a “persistent desire to adopt the social role and to acquire the physical appearance of the other sex” (American Psychiatric Association, 1994, p. 532). Although some people who identify as transgender do not feel a persistent need to make a physical transition to another sex category, many of those who identify as transgender do make physical and/or social transitions. Such transitions may involve change either from one sex category to another (e.g., male to female) or from one sex category to a more nuanced or ambiguous gender identity (e.g., female to gender queer).
These transitions can include name and pronoun changes, changes in clothing choice, facial and cranial hair, use of gestures and voice, surgery on genitals or secondary sex characteristics (e.g., breasts) and many other communicative and physical alterations. Such transition changes may constitute a change in the identity performance (Goffman, 1959), and so they may also cause changes in a transgender person’s relationships, as identity and relationships go hand in hand (Burkitt, 1991; Mead, 1934; Goffman, 1959).

In U.S. culture, relationships involving a transgender person are even more marginalized than gay and lesbian relationships, both in lay recognition and scholarly research (Emerson & Rosenfeld, 1996; Green, 2000; Hines, 2006). Because of this, we know little about the relational challenges that TG individuals face. Existing research suggests that transgender identity and a transition in sex or gender identity (or both) might affect the nature of close relationships in profound ways. For example, families often experience feelings of loss or grief when a member transitions (Emerson & Rosenfeld, 1996; Granucci Lesser, 1999; Gurvich, 1992; Peo, 1988). It is important for communication scholars to explore the ways that both transgender persons and relational partners of transgender persons talk about these experiences in order to discover what sort of meanings are constructed for transition and the transitioning person that may be connected to these feelings of grief or loss. Working from relational dialectics theory, this study took the first step to identify points of struggle in the communication of transgender persons and their families that might lead to an understanding of the renegotiation process and consequently, the experience of loss.

GENDER AND SEX VARIATIONS

The terms “sex” and “gender” have been differentiated in scholarly literature so that sex is considered a biological category determined by a combination of anatomy, hormones, and chromosomal makeup, and gender is considered a set of social expectations assigned to respective sex categories (Butler, 1990; Bell & Blaeuer, 2006; West & Zimmerman, 1987; Wood, 2006). Neither sex nor gender can be easily separated from identity and one or both can be the substance of transition for transgender persons. Although some might opt to transition physically and socially to another sex category, there are others who transition only their gender expression. Both sex and gender are integral to social identity performances (Wood, 2006) and therefore affect the ways others perceive us.

There are several terms currently used to describe non-normative gender identities, such as transvestite, transsexual, and transgender or trans-identified (Ellis & Eriksen, 2002; Gagne & Tewksbury, 1996; Parlee, 1996). The term “transsexual” is usually reserved for individuals who feel that the bodies they were born with are not reflective of their felt identities and may choose sexual confirmation/reassignment surgery to bring into line their material bodies with their felt identities (Ellis & Eriksen, 2002; Meyer-Bahlburg, 1994).

Currently, the DSM-IV estimates that 1 in 30,000 individuals identify as male to female transsexual and 1 in 100,000 individuals identify as female to male transsexual (American Psychiatric Association, 1994, p. 532). However, some scholars believe this to be an extreme underestimation. More current statistics put forth by scholars outside of the medical field estimate that at least 1 in every 2,500 adult males in the United States has had sexual reassignment surgery (SRS) and has become a postoperative woman (Olyslager & Conway, 2007). Even this does not take into
account the number of female to male transsexuals, those who have not come forward for SRS, or those who consider themselves transgender, but do not opt to transition through surgery.

The term “transgender” is often used as an umbrella term to incorporate the previously referenced identities as well as a variety of other gender-variant persons. Hines (2006) defines transgender as referring to “individuals who have undergone hormone treatment or surgery to reconstruct their bodies, or to those who transgress gender categories in ways which are less permanent” (p. 353). Not all persons who identify as transgender take steps to transition to another sex category or even away from one, but many do choose to engage in identity transition of some sort. Transition takes many forms, including but not limited to the steps mentioned above which consist of both physical and communicative changes.

Although terms are often used in different and sometimes contradictory ways, the conceptualization of “transgender” in the present study includes those persons who identify as transgender or transsexual and have taken one or more steps to transition their sex and/or gender identity (Meyer-Bahlburg, 1994). Throughout this article, I refer to transgender (TG) persons, since this term denotes a kinship among those with gender variant identities (Parlee, 1996) and is most reflective of the sample.

Most research focused on TG issues is clinical and informs about the nature of GID and treatment options for those who are diagnosed. A more recent area called Transgender Studies takes on many issues including TG identity and feminism, science and sex, gender identity, passing, and materiality (for an informative look at these issues, see Stryker & Whittel, 2006). Though much valuable work is being done to understand TG issues, more work is needed to understand how relationships are impacted by a trans-identity and transition. Zamboni (2006) argues that relational partners of a transitioning person may engage in a reconceptualization of who that person is when transition changes occur.

Communication scholars seem particularly well situated to understand the relational implications of such reconceptualizations through studying the meaning-making processes that occur when one relational partner transitions in gender/sx. If a profound reconceptualization of identity occurs due to a transition of sex and/or gender, then these aspects of identity must be integral to the ways we understand others and therefore relate to them.

**TRANSGENDER IDENTITY AND THE FAMILY**

A small body of research exists concerning the relational challenges that ensue when a person transitions. We know that narratives of transgender persons reveal feelings of isolation (Hines, 2006; Rubin, 2003). Many individuals lose relationships they had before they began to transition. Transgender individuals may transition at any given time in the life course that could cause a variety of complicated relational situations to arise including romantic and spousal relationship issues, family of origin issues, and even parenting issues. Scholars maintain that stigma and oppressive beliefs and attitudes surrounding the TG identities constrain not only TG individuals, but also their families of origin and extended families (Connolly, 2006; Fields, 2001).

According to Connolly (2006), family reactions to TG (and GLB) disclosures are “rarely neutral and typically have a wide range: positive and negative, static and erratic, with overt and covert communication” (pp. 7–8). Although much research on GLBT disclosure focuses on gay and lesbian identities, there is evidence to suggest that a disclosure of a TG identity
may be an even harder pill for families to swallow. Israel (2006) suggests that a common sentiment expressed to TG persons who come out to family is “Why can’t you just be gay?” (p. 52).

The problematic nature of transgender identity for families may be a result of cultural conceptions of gender, sex, and family identity. U.S. culture maintains deeply rooted ideas about sex and gender, legitimizing only two sex categories and characterizing variants as abnormal (Butler, 2004). Social norms and expectations, including those pertaining to relationships and institutional practices, are based on the assumption that sex is a dichotomous biological category. Many family relationship labels are gendered, such as daughter, uncle, grandfather, or niece. These relationship categories are strictly associated with one sex or another making it difficult to imagine a man being called “aunt” or a woman being referred to as “father.” These labels serve as indications that family relationships are steeped in assumptions of stable gender/sex identities.

A disruption of this gendered family role system may compromise traditional notions of family. Green (2000) suggests that once a person has disclosed a “deviant” sexual or gender identity to family members, any continued family relations after that point are considered voluntary—this implies that transgender identity could be a deal-breaker for family relationships. This runs contrary to our cultural conception of family as a system of nonvoluntary or obligatory relationships (Segrin & Flora, 2005).

Of course, we cannot take this to mean that all relational partners of TG persons react negatively. In fact, Israel (2006) states that particularly siblings of TG persons can sometimes become their brother or sister’s “biggest cheerleader” helping him or her to adjust to a new gender role (p. 56–57). As with disclosures of gay, lesbian, or bisexual sexual orientations, family reactions to TG disclosure can function to supplement or relieve stress for the TG person (Goldfried, 2001).

Although some families suffer from destructive conflict after similar identity disclosures, others form more intimate bonds through support giving (Mallon, 1999). Whether the outcome is positive or negative, relational changes seem likely. Beeler and DiProva (1999) and Connolly (2006) suggest that the family begins a transition of its own after this kind of disclosure. Connolly points to communicative redefinitions stating that “... relational dynamics typically shift and new patterns are established. Ways that families experience intimacy, distancing, and boundaries may change” (2006, p. 13). If some sort of transition is also experienced by spouses/partners and other family members, it is imperative to explore what about this particular change in identity leads to a transition in meaning, and possibly relationships.

Some studies have examined the complexities faced by relational partners, post-disclosure of trans-identity. Hines (2006) found relationships and transition sometimes incompatible: “Findings show that the process of gender transition might initiate irreconcilable shifts in partnering roles, leading to relationship breakup” (p. 360). Hines also explored the concept of transparenting, or parenting as a transgender person, as a very complex relational process. Transparents may be problematic to our cultural ideas of parenthood—ideas that are stalwartly linked to the binary of biological sex.

Other studies have focused on families’ experiences, revealing many negative responses that result from a son’s or daughter’s disclosure and transition, including feelings of loss, grief, guilt, shame, betrayal, anxiety, denial, anger, and depression (Emerson & Rosenfeld, 1996; Granucci Lesser, 1999; Gurvich, 1992; and Peo, 1988). Research in counseling and therapy suggests that the experience of grief is one of the main roadblocks to family support of a transgender person
(Ellis & Eriksen, 2002; Emerson & Rosenfeld, 1996; Granucci Lesser, 1999). But, what is it about a transition in sex/gender identity that incites feelings of loss and grief?

During transition, the TG person often changes in material ways as described above. Further, some TG persons may alter their communication patterns, both verbal and nonverbal, in order to express the gender associated with a particular sex category (i.e., femininity or masculinity). Some may adopt a new name and may prefer to be referred to by pronouns that coincide with their transitioned identity.

These changes constitute a shift in the performed identity (Butler, 1990; Goffman, 1959; West & Zimmerman, 1987) of the transgender person. This apparent shift might lead relational partners to perceive that the TG person has a different identity and therefore they may conceptualize him or her as a different person, posttransition.

Relational partners could construct the meaning that a former identity of the transgender person is gone, replaced by a new or different personal identity. So, even though no death or even tangible loss of a person has occurred, family members may still feel grief, depending on how they conceptualize personal identity in relation to transition. In this sense, it may not be clear over what family members are grieving – the object of the loss maybe ambiguous.

Ambiguous loss is a term first used by Boss (1999) who aimed to capture the dynamics of both psychological and physical presence-absence paradoxes. Boss (2007) describes physical absence as paradoxically “leaving without goodbye” and psychological absence as paradoxically “goodbye without leaving.” The former may be used to describe the experience of having a missing family member without confirmation of death (e.g., missing soldier). The latter describes reactions to a family member who is physically still present, but mentally deteriorated (e.g., in a coma) or drastically changed in some way.

The feeling of ambiguous loss is a psychological phenomenon that may result from the experience of contradictory meanings. It seems that a person who experiences this psychological paradox is likely struggling to make sense of and manage opposing meanings. In the case of transgender identity, the struggle for meaning may be centered on personal identity (male vs. female identity), familial roles (mother vs. father), nature of the relationship (husband and wife vs. some other configuration), or all of these. Given that the previous research shows that reconceptualization may happen for family members/partners of transitioning transgender individuals and that this reconceptualization may be connected to ambiguity in making meaning of transgender identity and transition, Relational Dialectics Theory was used to ground the present study.

THEORETICAL GROUNDING: RELATIONAL DIALECTICS THEORY

Relational Dialectics Theory (RDT) (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996; Baxter, 2006, 2011; Montgomery & Baxter, 1998) is an interpretive theory that assumes “relating is a complex process of meaning-making” (Baxter, 2006, p. 130). The theory is rooted in the work of Mikhail Bakhtin, which centers on the struggle between competing meanings. It is in the interplay of competing voices (i.e., meaning systems) that meaning is made for relationships (Baxter, 2001; Baxter & Montgomery, 1996).

Relational Dialectics Theory is an appropriate tool for exploring relationships in light of transgender identity for three reasons: (1) transitions in sex and/or gender identity are
likely to cause contradictions for family members in the ways they perceive their transgender relatives/partners and perhaps the way they make meaning of their relationships with the transitioning persons (e.g., a son becomes a daughter); (2) previous research suggests that disclosure of transgender identity and subsequent transition might function as an unexpected family stressor that would likely manifest as struggle(s) in communication surrounding the stressor; and (3) previous research shows that feelings of loss are experienced by families of those who transition and this type of ambiguous loss seems to be linked to a struggle in meaning making.

Much of the research using RDT narrows the study of relational dialectics to examining three basic dialectical tensions identified by Baxter and Montgomery (1996): openness-closedness, novelty-predictability, and autonomy-connection. Baxter (2006) urged researchers not to take a “cookie-cutter” approach in limiting study to these three tensions, but to consider the complexity of these tensions, to allow for the surfacing of other possible sites of struggle, and to account for the interconnectedness of existing tensions (p. 136). Some family communication researchers have done just that and have applied RDT in interesting ways, uncovering multiple dialectical tensions that exist for families in a variety of contexts.

Baxter, Braithwaite, Bryant, and Wagner (2004) examined communication of stepchildren about their stepparents finding competing discourses of parenthood, among others. Later, Braithwaite and Baxter (2006) identified dialectical tensions present in perceptions of communication between step-children and nonresidential parents. They identified two main contradictions: Parenting-Nonparenting, and Openness-Closedness. Other researchers have examined dialectical tensions present in family experiences such as adoption (Krusiewicz & Wood, 2001), child abuse (Ford, Ray, & Ellis, 1999), and loss of a child (Toller, 2005).

Particularly relevant to the current study is research focused on contradictions surrounding family stressors, specifically grief and loss. Baxter, Braithwaite, Golish, and Olson (2002) examined the contradictions experienced by wives who were coping with their husbands’ adult dementia. They identified a complex series of struggles where wives experienced interwoven dialectics of Presence-Absence, Certainty-Uncertainty, Openness-Closedness, and Past-Present.

The presence-absence dialectic refers to what has been termed by other scholars as “married-widowhood” (Rollins, Waterman, & Esmay, 1985, p. 68), which is characterized by the feelings of spousal loss, but continuing responsibilities to a marital relationship. Wives engaged in “pre-grieving” for their spouses who were still alive, and were unsure of how to negotiate identities between the roles of married and widowed (Baxter et al., 2002; Rollins et al., 1985). This presence-absence dialectic seems to be linked to the psychological experience mentioned earlier, ambiguous loss. Golish and Powell (2003) found that parents of premature infants experienced the birth of their child as an ambiguous loss, where parents mourned the loss of a ‘normal’ birth, but celebrated the birth of their child.

Similar competing meanings might exist for family members and partners who experience the changing identities of their transgender relatives and partners. As a first step to understanding the ways meaning is constructed surrounding this phenomenon, the following research question was posed:

RQ1: What (if any) sites of struggle characterize the online communication of family members surrounding transgender identity and transgender transition?
METHODOLOGY

Data were obtained from online postings to transgender support discussion forums posted by transgender persons and those who consider themselves spouses/partners and family members of transgender persons. These data were analyzed using interpretive, qualitative analysis. For an exploratory study, online data provided an ideal tool for “listening in” on naturally occurring communication of transgender persons and family of transgender persons. According to Bowker and Tuffin (2004) “the online medium can be conceptualized as a legitimate research tool for gathering data about of how people operate in the social world” (p. 229).

Two websites were used for data collection: Susan’s Place (www.susans.org) and Laura’s Playground (www.lauras-playground.com). The purpose of these websites is to provide information, support, and suicide prevention for transsexuals, crossdressers, androgynes, the intersexed, and their families. Costigan (1999) argued that online sites, such as those with bulletin boards and message forums, foster communities between geographically distant and socially diverse individuals creating opportunities for alternative subjectivities to arise and gain voice.

Certainly, websites like these provide a unique opportunity for researchers to analyze communication of members of a population that may be otherwise difficult to reach. On both websites, members create usernames that ensure as much or as little anonymity as desired. Permission to analyze messages was granted by the webmasters of each website, given that their members’ identities would remain anonymous and their messages be respected. Each site’s forums were organized in a topic tree format where an individual posts a new topic (question, comment, story, solicitation of advice, etc.) within a particular subject forum, and others post replies in a “topic thread” fashion. For the remainder of this article, the term “poster” will be used instead of “participant” to reference the individuals whose messages were utilized as data.

Data Collection

For each site, all topic threads posted under subjects that mentioned family, relationships, or support, such as family/significant other support before October 1, 2007 were counted and analyzed as data. Additionally, a search was conducted for any topic threads concerning family issues that were discussed under other forum headings, e.g., transgender talk. Each topic thread featured a posting with some number of replies (some posted by the original poster in response to others’ replies). Topic threads were copied, pasted, and exported into a word document. The final data document was 127 pages with 140 distinct posts (single messages) by approximately 63 distinct posters (the number of posters was determined by counting separate screen names, but it is possible that the same person could have more than one screen name).

The transgender identity of the poster and/or the relationship to the transgender person was determined through the contents of the postings. The majority of the posters indicated that they were TG individuals and spouses or partners of transgender persons, followed by those who indicated they were siblings of transgender persons. There were fewer posts by parents of TG individuals and none by children of TG persons. Approximately 38% of posts referenced spousal or committed romantic partnerships, approximately 21% of posts referenced a sibling relationship, approximately 20% referenced a parent/child relationship, and approximately 7%
referenced family relationships, more generally. (The remaining posts were posted by TG persons or family members in response to other posts, but veered from the topic of relationships).

Even though messages can be seen by those who sign up for a screen name and password, every effort was made to protect the identity of the posters. For the sake of anonymity, contents of posts were separated from the screen name of the individual who posted the message before data were read or analyzed. Before analysis, any names mentioned within the body of a post were replaced with pseudonyms.

**Data Analysis**

Analysis occurred in multiple stages. In stage one, all data were read multiple times before any categories or themes were identified. After the third reading, I felt familiar enough with the postings to begin the process of coding. In all subsequent stages, inductive analytic coding (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002) was used to identify major themes in message postings. In addition to inductive coding, there was an element of deductive coding in that I was primed by previous research to look for any talk about grief and loss that might be characterized by contradictions of meaning.

Themes were identified and refined using constant comparative analysis (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). In stage two, postings were flagged for potential contradictions any time the talk reflected opposing viewpoints or counterpoints (e.g., I want to do A, but I feel I should do B), which were often marked by words like but, although, even though, on the other hand, and however. In stage three, flagged postings were analyzed for possible groupings and category formulations. For example, if a post referred to feelings of loss and acknowledged that the transgender person was still present, or described the transgender person as “gone,” but “still here,” or when transition was described as a “living death,” these postings were grouped together in a thematic category.

Each datum was compared to prior data for similarity and difference. If a contradiction in meaning was apparent that was different from any previous categories, a new thematic category was formed. In the fourth stage, categories were reviewed to verify coherence and to identify the broader contradiction in meaning that characterized the themes as sites of struggle. The sites were then named for the opposing strands of meaning they contained (e.g., Presence-Absence).

Data were analyzed until the point of theoretical saturation, where it was judged that no new thematic categories were present in the postings (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Saturation was reached after analyzing the 76th posting gathered, but I continued to collect and analyze relevant postings in an effort to verify that the interpretation of first 76 postings rang true for the entire data set, as well as to extract the best possible exemplars to represent thematic categories.

Exemplars were chosen based on the criteria that they were clear and concise examples of the kind of talk that constituted each struggle. No effort was made to ensure exemplars came from different posters, as again, the screen names were separated from the content of the data before analysis.

**RESULTS**

The research question asked: What (if any) sites of struggle characterize the online communication of family members surrounding transgender identity and transgender transition? Postings
rendered three sites of dialectical struggle: Presence vs. Absence, Sameness vs. Difference, and Self vs. Other. In what follows, each site of struggle is illustrated with exemplar quotes. In an effort to preserve the actual communication of posters, no edits were made. These exemplars give insight into the contradictions that surfaced in the communication of the individuals who posted to these websites. Many postings by those in romantic relationships with a transgender individual indicated that they were married to the transgender person, but others were less clear. To respect all committed, romantic partnerships, the term *partner* is used. As indicated earlier, pseudonyms are used to refer to the posters.

**Presence vs. Absence**

One dialectical struggle prevalent in postings by partners, parents, and siblings concerned the presence and absence of the transgender person. Family members talked of grieving the loss of their children, siblings, or partners who were not actually gone. This grief was cited as occurring when their transgender relative/partner transitioned, constructing a sense of loss surrounding the person’s former identity. Relational partners likened the loss to the experience of the death of a family member, and sometimes cited their grief as standing in the way of their support for their TG relative/partner. Below, Judith’s and then Amanda’s posts illustrate this struggle. They both described the feeling of loss surrounding their partners’ transitions:

Judith: *there is a very real sense of loss ... losing your husband, your family life and dynamic.*

Amanda: *i understand what you mean by “him dying”, i sort of went through the same thing with Isabella and her other persona. i was afraid of what i would lose when the old persona was gone.*

The struggle for meaning here occurs around conceptualization of the transgender family members/partners. The persons being spoken of are not dead but have transitioned their identities by way of sex and/or gender. Both quotes illustrate that transition can bring dramatic changes to the lives of family members of TG persons. Judith constructs her experience as one of grief by claiming that there is indeed a “real sense of loss.” By making the claim that the sense of loss is *real*, Judith’s talk recognizes that others may not validate her experience as one of mourning, because her TG partner is actually still alive. But this statement, along with the phrase “losing your husband,” shows that the meaning she constructs for her partner’s transition is similar to death.

The second quote also shows the construction of transition as death. Amanda talks about her TG partner as having two identities, and references the experience of one persona “being gone” and the other replacing it. She likens this replacement to “him dying” indicating that she struggles between her feeling that she has lost her partner (old identity) and the recognition that her partner (new identity) is present in her life. Just as partners struggled with the presence and absence of their significant others, siblings struggled with grieving the loss of their brothers or sisters. Helen’s post illustrates this well.

Helen: *I recently lost my only other brother to cancer, and feel as if I am losing my other brother. I cannot think of him as a sister.*
Helen’s talk constructs transition as a sort of death when she says that she feels she is “losing” her brother. She even references the death of another brother indicating that she experiences transition in a similar way. However, at the same time, Helen recognizes that her transitioning sibling is not actually gone, but is in another gendered (and possibly sexed) form when she says she cannot think of him as “a sister.” Helen’s talk also indicates struggle when she uses the masculine pronoun “him” and the feminine kinship term “sister” in the same sentence. Her talk constructs the concepts of male and female as opposing meanings when she implies that “brother” and “sister” are incompatible, and cannot be used to describe one person. This suggests that the struggle some family members experience in response to transition is likely rooted in constructions of sex and gender in relation to personal identity.

For parents of (adult) TG children, the presence-absence contradiction seemed to be quite salient. However, this sentiment from parents was expressed through the postings of sons or daughters. TG posters described their parents’ struggle between grieving the loss of the child they raised and accepting the person their child became or will become through transition. Jamie’s post about her father’s reaction demonstrates this well:

Jamie: He took it very well and said this to me: I will still love you with all my unconditional [sic] love knowing with all my support knowing I will lose my son to become my daughter.

Although reported by their TG sons and daughters, comments like this showed the reactions experienced by some parents. This quote illustrates that even though the parent recognized that the child would still be present (though with a changed identity) the transition is described as the loss of a son. It seems especially relevant that the father refers to losing “a son” and gaining “a daughter,” instead of simply losing “a child.” This implies that what is being lost is a gendered identity and that sex and gender are perhaps so integral to personal identity that a change in one or both of them causes family members to feel that the person has fundamentally changed. This fundamental change in the self, connected to sex/gender identity, is tied to the next site of struggle which concerns sameness and difference of transgender persons and their relationships to others.

Sameness vs. Difference

A second site of struggle that characterized the communication of posters concerned the issue of sameness and difference. This struggle for meaning was related to two issues: sameness-difference of the transgender person throughout the transition process and sameness-difference of the relationship between a transgender person and his or her partner. The first of these, continuity of identity, is connected to the experience of the transgender person as both present and absent. It seems logical that if the transgender person is conceptualized as the same person even after transition, then family members will experience that person as still present. However, if the transgender person is conceptualized as a different person due to transition, then family members will experience the absence of the pre-transition identity. Family members as well as the TG persons struggled in their talk with whether the TG person was the same or different after transitioning. This struggle surfaced in talk of sibling, partner, and parental relationships, but was constructed slightly differently by TG persons and other family members.
Transgender posters’ talk constructed a contradiction between what they described as a “true self” (referring to the sex/gender they are transitioning or have transitioned to) and the self they presented before transitioning. Some described a change in self via transition while others claimed the self had been stable throughout the process. Transgender persons discussed difficulty in trying to make parents and siblings understand the difference and sometimes the continuity between the selves. Below, Jesse’s and Penny’s posts show how some transgender posters constructed who they were on the “inside” as their “true” selves - different from how their families identified them:

Jesse: When I tell Mum should I dress as Owen or more like as I do most of the time or should I wear what I really want to wear? . . . I have read how people come out to their familiy [sic] and friends by showing them who they really are.

Penny: i know who i am and how i feel and i do hope they can eventually accept me for that person and realize[sic] that its[sic] me theyeve [sic] always known underneath im[sic] just being my true self on the outside.

Transitioning persons discussed their fears that their relatives and partners would not be able to comprehend the nature of what they talked about as the “true self” versus the self they had been presenting up to the point of transition. Often, postings from transgender people revealed a struggle to explain to parents and siblings that they are both the same and different after transition, through a separation of physicality and personality. Jackson’s post illustrates this well:

Jackson: i told them i am still the person theyeve [sic] always known on the inside, i may just look different eventually on the outside.

As this quote demonstrates, some TG persons describe themselves (and other TG persons) as changing only in outward appearance, constructing the “inner self” as constant through transition. Other times TG posters described transition as a move from one identity to another. Kyle’s and Ashley’s quotes show this different construction of identity:

Kyle: speaking from the transgender side of the issue, it would help if you simply sat down with your new sister and simply got to know her as she is now and not as you remember her as him.

Ashley: but if you truely [sic] love your sibling, and wish her the best, then getting to know her and understand her as she is, not as she represented herself in the past, is truely [sic] important to the both of you.

Drawing from these quotes, it seems that some TG persons sometimes conceptualize the transitioned self as different – as changed not only in physical ways, but also in spirit or personality. Partners’ postings also showed a struggle in conceptualizing the TG person as either the same or different, or both. Jane questioned how well she knew her partner:

Pam: what I went through in the beginning in particular, the sense of having one’s basic sense of reality uprooted. (I know the sun will rise tomorrow, I know there will be death and taxes, and I certainly know him and who I am with him. Wait. . . . . I don’t know “him” and apparently never did . . . do I know anything. . . . ?) [quotation marks in original].
This construction of knowing and not knowing her TG spouse may be connected to the Presence-Absence dialectic in that partners construct the meaning of transition as a falling away of an identity/person they knew (and over which they might grieve) and the creation of a new identity, with which they are not familiar. The connection between change in sex/gender identity and change in self seems to be a strong one.

The second struggle of sameness and difference concerned the nature of relationships between partners during and after transition. Transgender posters and partners of transgender persons talked about their relationships as both the same as in the past (i.e., quantitatively existing between the same two people), and also different (qualitatively, in modes of relating), posttransition. Partners described being pulled back and forth between the relational frame of “partners” and the relational frame of “friends” by way of physical intimacy and emotional intimacy, while they questioned which to privilege in their relationships or how to still privilege both given the change in one person’s sex/gender. Rose’s post captured this struggle well:

Rose: We have been married for 38 years and we are very good friends. I still love her and she has said the same to me. We are not intimate as she says that she is not a lesbian.

It seems that transition changes some partnerships in monumental ways. Many partners communicated a desire for both kinds of intimacy, but indicated that relational expectations constrained them in experiencing both. The fact that the two relational frames, friend and partner, and the two types of intimacy, emotional and physical, are constructed as competing is undoubtedly tied up with complexities of sexual orientation, which seemed to leave partners either struggling to reconcile these intimacies in their current relationship, or to make a choice between privileging their emotional relationship together or their sexual desires apart. Opal’s post shows the struggle of intimacy brought about by complications of sexual orientation:

Opal: I knew that I loved Penelope and didn’t love anyone else and didn’t want to love anyone else. I also am not gay. And at first I didn’t know how I was going to feel about being married to a female, but at my age sex wasn’t the most important thing to us.

Partners appeared to both want to remain in the marital/committed relationships and to not want to compromise their sexual orientation and constructed the relational types of partners and friends as competing. This seemed to be the central issue in the struggle over whether their relationships were the same, different, or both the same and different than before transition.

Self vs. Other

The third struggle present in the data can be characterized as one between self and other and rested on the issue of support. Family members and partners often talked about wanting to be unconditionally supportive of the transgender person, but because of a lack of understanding, religious or moral beliefs, or their own emotional issues, they struggled with actually doing so. Posts from transgender persons also revealed a struggle between self and other, indicating that they wanted to help their family members come to terms with their identities and transitions, but that they felt the need to focus on themselves as well.
Partners seemed to struggle with determining whose needs and feelings should be considered and privileged, their own or their transgender partners’.

It seemed that at times, giving support meant privileging the needs of the TG partner rather than self needs, which was constructed as potentially problematic. Danni considered this issue in her post:

Danni: On one hand, you want to support your loved one . . . on the other hand.. you have your own feelings, fears, and other emotions rolling through.

Tracy’s post constructs a struggle between needs of self and needs of other, but privileges her transgender partner’s need for support over her need for understanding:

Tracy: But in the beginning there is also the fear that this may be the one I will not be able to see through her eyes, to understand in the way she needs. Support whether I come to a complete understanding of a particular issue or not - is not in question.

The struggle between self and other was also prevalent in postings by siblings of TG persons. The examples below illustrate the range of issues posters cited as hindrances to support.

June: I understand that transitioning is necessarily a time of being self-centered . . . so I don’t say anything but I need someone to talk to! My support group consists of people who think I should just remove myself or transgenders who think everything should revolve around my sibling.

Robert: I want to be supportive of his choice, but I am feeling angry and sad.

Claire: Loving my sibling and supporting his decision will never be a problem . . . I am also having some problems dealing with this on a spiritual and theological level. This is not how we were raised.

June’s posting frames selfishness on the part of the transitioning person as allowable when she describes transition as a time of self-centeredness, but implies that family members should not be similarly self-centered. However, June also acknowledges that she is in need of support. She indicates that she has received different advice from different groups of people - one group suggests she privilege her own needs, removing herself from a trying situation. The other group, transgender people, advises her to privilege the needs of her transgender relative.

Robert constructs a struggle between his desire to be supportive of his transgender relative and his negative emotional response to the relative’s identity and transition, implying that these emotions might hinder his ability to be supportive. Lastly, although Claire says that support for her transgender sibling is not in question, she indicates that supporting her sibling creates a struggle because doing so is not in line with her own theological beliefs.

Postings by TG persons also referenced the tension between self and other. Their talk constructed a struggle between respecting and supporting their own needs and feelings vs. the needs and feelings of their families. Cam and Steph addressed this issue in their posts presented below:

Cam: i just feel like such a nasty person to put my mom through this. but do i want [sic] to keep putting myself through hell pretending to be a straight girl when really i like girls and i am a guy not a girl.

Steph: I’m very supportive but, at the same time, I have my own issues to deal with.
Sometimes what TG persons see as best for them (e.g., disclosure) may not be what they see as best for their families, though they may desire to meet the needs of both parties. The same seems to hold true for family members and partners of transgender persons. This struggle between self and other, as well as the struggles between presence and absence and sameness and difference, suggests that meanings of relationships and identities may be salient for both transgender persons and relational partners when transitions occur.

**DISCUSSION**

This study provides a first glimpse into the discursive dynamics that surround TG identity in families. The points of contradiction present in the data seem to indicate that TG identity may function as a family stressor (Segrin & Flora, 2005), since these family members/partners were struggling to make sense of a variety competing meanings surrounding this experience, bringing about feelings of loss, as well as relational change. Clearly, a change in the sex and/or gender identity of one family member positions families to renegotiate identity and relationships.

The most salient and perhaps the most practically and theoretically significant point of struggle for posters was theme of Presence-Absence. In the present study, partners, siblings, and parents were described as experiencing a phenomenon like a “living death” of their TG family member, which is clearly linked to ambiguous loss (Boss, 1999, 2007). This struggle between presence and absence is similar to the Presence-Absence dialectic found by Baxter et al. (2002), but different in an important way. In the previous study, wives with husbands with dementia experienced their spouse as being physically present, but mentally/psychologically absent. However, in the present study, family members and partners/spouses were struggling with a different kind of presence and absence where the TG family member was both present physically, in that the person was still alive, and also was present mentally/psychologically. Since the TG person was still present both physically and mentally, the absence seemed to be of a different nature than the absence experienced in association with dementia. Family members in the present study described mourning the “old” person while trying to accept the “new” person. This particular manifestation of the Presence-Absence contradiction revolves around issues of sex, gender, and identity, holding particular potential to inform research on the role of gender and sex in identity and relationships.

Further investigation of this contradiction is needed to understand the complexities of transition as an experience of death and rebirth of the TG individual. It would be useful to understand what exactly family members are grieving: Are they grieving due to the physical changes that do not allow them to “see” the previous form of the family member, the communication behaviors of the former self (if those change), the nature of the relationship they had with the TG person’s former self (if change does occur), the familial role the TG person played (e.g., husband), or perhaps some combination of all of these? Answers to these questions and others would help to paint a more complete picture of this particular Presence-Absence contradiction.

Both manifestations of the struggle between sameness and difference (i.e., nature of relationship and identity of the transgender person) are related to the findings from the Baxter et al. (2002). First, partners in the present study struggled with the meaning of their relationship in the past and the meaning of the relationship post-transition. In their study on adult dementia, Baxter et al. found the Past-Present contradiction reported by wives who were coping with their
husbands’ adult dementia, interwoven with other contradictions of Presence-Absence, Certainty-Uncertainty, and Openness-Closedness, in which wives reported a struggle between the past and present states of their relationships. In the present study, the sameness-difference or past-present tension was organized around competing meanings of relationship types (friend vs. partner), again, differing theoretically from Baxter et al.’s previous description of a similar contradiction.

Although physical intimacy and emotional intimacy are not typically characterized as oppositional in our conceptions of romantic relationships, the two seemed to be at odds in some marital/committed relationships where one partner had transitioned. One would typically regard the ideal romantic relationship as having both types of intimacy. However, sexual orientation complicates the existence of both once the TG spouse begins to transition, changing the nature of the couple either from same-sex to opposite-sex or from opposite-sex to same-sex. For the majority of the posters, the couple transitioned from an opposite-sex couple to a same-sex couple, which also transitioned them from a heterosexual couple to a potentially homosexual couple.

Postings indicated that once partners were of the same sex, partners desired both the past and the current states of the relationship, or at least elements of both. Partners wanted physical intimacy in their lives, but did not want to forfeit their marital/committed relationship and emotional intimacy to obtain it; though some felt this was inevitable due to complications of sexual orientation (e.g., they were not lesbian). Partners seemed to be caught between competing relational frames: platonic vs. romantic.

The second form of the struggle between sameness and difference centered on the personal identity of the transitioning person. Family members and partners had difficulty conceptualizing their TG relative’s/partner’s identity in light of a transition in sex and/or gender. The changes that the transgender persons engaged in were sometimes conceptualized as changes to the person’s identity, but other times were dismissed as merely material changes, having little affect on who the person is. Still, other times, the transgender person was constructed as simultaneously the same person, but different in important ways.

Interestingly, a similar phenomenon was also described as characteristic of the Presence-Absence contradiction in the Baxter et al. (2002) study of marital relationships and adult dementia. Wives conceptualized their husbands as the same person, but also as profoundly different. On the other side of the issue, TG family members wanted to assure their families that they were the same at times, but at other times wanted them to recognize that they were different from the selves they presented, pre-transition.

The final struggle in the meaning making of posters surrounded consideration of self and other. The struggle between the privileging of the needs, desires, and goals of the self or of the other centered on the issue of support. Support was referred to in countless postings by both family members and TG posters as something that was needed from, expected of, and given by family members of TG individuals. Many posters talked about their desire to give or receive unconditional support from family members, which demonstrates that posters were operating from the dominant meaning of family in U.S. culture - that family relationships are obligatory and nonvoluntary, and support is expected from relational partners (Segrin & Flora, 2005).

Although support was described by TG persons as something much needed from family members and also at times something that their family members desired to give without pause, postings showed that unconditional support is not always given to and received by TG family members. Support-giving was constructed as somewhat problematic in light of religious beliefs, family values, and even lack of cognitive and empathic understanding of TG identity.
Family members struggled to honor their familial relationships, roles, and obligations in the face of social stigma, religious commitments, and other personal beliefs that seemed to work against support of their TG family members’ transitions. In some cases, a disclosure and transition of this nature may cause family members to redefine or even relinquish ties to their TG relative/partner (Green, 2000). The reasons why are still unexplored, but this potential disruption in family/partner relationships suggests that sex and gender identity are vastly important to family relationships.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

Although the data analyzed in the present study were rich, the nature of the data presented some limitations. First, the findings may be particular to the communication of posters from these two web sites and therefore cannot be generalized beyond the sample. One factor that might contribute to the potentially particular nature of these data is that these websites are clearly meant to be sources of support for transgender persons and their partners/relatives, though it is not always the case that messages posted are completely supportive of transgender identity.

Still, though, the perception of support for transgender identity and the assumed presence of similar others (TG persons and family members) (Frable, Platt, & Hoey, 1998) likely influences the messages posted to these forums. Posters may feel the need to post positive, affirmative messages and may downplay negative or even conflicting feelings associated with experiences of TG identity, which might mask further points of struggle.

Further, since there was no contact between the researcher and the posters, elaborated information about contradictions could not be solicited, which could provide a better understanding of the meaning systems at play at these sites of struggle. For example, it would be helpful to probe family members about their conceptualizations of personal identity in order to uncover what meanings are being invoked to make sense of the transgender person’s identity through the transition process. This could also help to illuminate the role that sex and gender play in meanings of personal identity.

Interview data would be beneficial for analyzing not just the presence of meaning-making struggles, but the roots of the struggles, that is, the meaning systems that are at play that bring about the experience of a transgender person as present and absent, or as the same and different. Finally, a richer data set could be explored for not only competing meanings but the interplay of the meanings that make up these sites of struggle. In other words, how do family members handle competing meanings and frame their experiences through the privileging or dismissal of contradictory meanings? Investigating the meaning making process of family members with regard to transgender identity and transition with an eye toward competing meanings and their interplay would provide a more nuanced and complete understanding of how and why this process incites the experience of ambiguous loss.

The next logical step in this line of research is to gather data via in-depth interviews and to analyze them using the recently published second iteration of Relational Dialectics Theory, which focuses more on the aspects of meaning making outlined here (Baxter, 2011).

Even with these limitations, the present study contributes to family communication research by providing a first step in exploring the contradictions in meaning-making that follow from a change in sex and/or gender identity of a family member or partner. This research provides additional support for the argument (Green, 2000) that transgender identity can strain family
relationships to the point where members struggle to maintain family relationship expectations of obligatory, unconditional support.

The question of why this type of change might disrupt family relationships is crucial to explore. Perhaps TG identity disrupts families because gender and sex are essential to the expectations and enactments of family relationships. Further, sex and gender may be so entwined with personal identity that family members no longer know how to interact with a relative they feel has changed in such ways. This study emphasizes the importance of gender issues in everyday, familial relationships, and is therefore an important step in considering ways that gender and materiality infiltrate our interpersonal and familial experiences.

REFERENCES


