Grieving Gender: Trans-identities, Transition, and Ambiguous Loss
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More and more families include a member who is trans-identified, and therefore, may be called to consider how sex and gender matter to identity and relationships. Previous research shows that for some family members this is not a simple matter. Often, family members experience transition as a living death, wherein the trans-identified person is perceived as somehow present and absent, the same and different, at once. The purposes of this study were to understand what it is about the transition of sex/gender that incites this meaning struggle and how meaning-making is connected to ambiguous loss. Relational Dialectics Theory was used to analyze how family members construct meanings for transition through competing discourses related to sex, gender, and personal identity. Findings suggest that family members' meaning making processes position them to endure, overcome, or avoid the feelings of grief related to transition.

Keywords: Transgender Identity; Ambiguous Loss; Relational Dialectics Theory

Often regarded as fixed and enduring, neither sex nor gender is easily separated from our experiences, as they are woven tightly together and into our social fabric (Lorber, 1994). This overtone is particularly observable in family systems wherein roles are gendered and assigned to us based on sex. As a female-bodied person, if I were to parent then I would be considered a mother, a role accompanied by gendered expectations. Even if a male were to perform the behaviors expected of a mother, we would not likely consider him one. He, of course, would be a father. Hence, even when gender is considered to be performative (Butler, 1988) it is often difficult to disentangle it from sex. This structuring makes the family a rich site for exploring the ways that these constructs arrange our perceptions of identity and relationships.
Nowhere else are these (dis)connections more salient than in families with trans-identified members; such identities bring into sharp focus that which we often take for granted. Even for those trans persons who do not transition from one sex category to another, moving to a more gender-fluid identity involves a shift away from one if not clearly toward another. For family members, transition brings about a renegotiation of meaning regarding the trans person’s identity, which often incites ambiguous loss (Boss, 1999a). This loss is related to contradiction in the meaning making process resulting in the perception that the trans person is both present and absent, the same and different (Norwood, 2012). The purpose of this study was to discover what competing meanings create this contradiction and therefore complicate the sense-making endeavors of family members who experience transition in this way, as a living death.

Review of Literature

The term transsexual often describes those who feel they were born in bodies that do not reflect their gender identities. Some are diagnosed with Gender Identity Disorder, currently conceptualized as a desire to socially and physically inhabit the role of the opposite sex (American Psychiatric Association, 1994), and may undergo sexual reassignment surgery (SRS) to do so (Ellis & Eriksen, 2002). Transgender is used to describe those “who have undergone hormone treatment or surgery . . . or to those who transgress gender categories in ways which are less permanent” (Hines, 2006, p. 353). Still, there are others who do not wish to transition to either culturally legitimated sex category, and identify as trans or as gender queer. I will use the terms trans-identified person and trans person in an attempt to encompass all of these identities. The prevalence of trans-identities is a contested matter, as estimations are sparse and biased. The DSM-IV claims 1 in 30,000 is a male to female (M2F) transsexual and 1 in 100,000 is female to male (F2M) (APA, 1994), though these numbers and the DSM itself are the topic of controversy. Others estimate at least 1 in 2,500 adult males in the US have had SRS (Olyslager & Conway, 2007). Still, this leaves out F2M persons and persons who do not seek such surgeries.

As with disclosures of queer sexual orientations, family reactions to trans-identity can worsen or relieve stress for the trans person (Mallon, 1999). Because family members must redefine their understandings of the gender-variant relative (Zamboni, 2006), transitions may happen not only for trans persons, but also their families (Beeler & DiProva, 1999; Connolly, 2006). Some relationships may not fare well. Green (2000) suggests that once a person has disclosed a deviant gender identity, family relations become voluntary. Trans persons often find themselves rejected by family for various reasons. Some may want to distance themselves from stigma surrounding trans-identity (Beeler & DiProva, 1999). Others may have difficulty with changes to relational labels and scripts. Hines (2006) found some partnerships to be irreconcilable with transition, due to complications of sexual orientation and relationship negotiation. Other family members and partners find it difficult to offer full support for trans-identified persons because doing so goes against their own
needs, values, or desires (Norwood, 2012). Finally, family members may experience emotional struggles that inhibit supportive relationships. A major obstacle to family support is the experience of profound grief (Ellis & Eriksen, 2002; Emerson & Rosenfeld, 1996; Granucci Lesser, 1999; Peo, 1988)—grief that is quite complex, because no one has died. The experience of bereavement where the object of grief is unclear is called *ambiguous loss* (Boss, 1999a, 1999b, 2007).

**Ambiguous Loss and Presence—Absence**

The experience of ambiguous loss comes from “Not knowing whether a loved person is absent or present, dead or alive” (Boss, 1999b, p. 4). This can result from physical absence joined with psychological presence, such as when someone is missing without confirmation of death, or from psychological absence coupled with a physical presence, such as when one is not dead, but is mentally unavailable (e.g., comatose). When an experience is ambiguous, meaning-making is at best murky and at worst problematic. Ambiguity stalls the grief process, preventing coping and closure (Boss, 1999a). Boss (2007) elaborates, “Family members have no other option but to construct their own truth about the status of the person absent in mind or body. Without information to clarify their loss, family members have no choice but to live with the paradox of absence and presence” (pp. 105–106). Researchers have explored ambiguous loss related to a variety of family stressors wherein a member is perceived as absent in either mind or body, including autism (O’Brien, 2007), premature birth (Golish & Powell, 2003), military deployment (Faber, Willerton, Clymer, MacDermind, & Weiss, 2008), and dementia (Baxter, Braithwaite, Golish, & Olson, 2002).

In an exploratory study of relational partners’ online message board posts, I found that grief was commonly discussed in relation to transition, connected to dialectics of presence—absence and sameness—difference with regard to the trans-identified person’s identity transition. For many, transition was perceived as a living death (Norwood, 2012). The findings of this study were limited, as I had no interaction with the posters and therefore restricted access to their stories. The preliminary findings warrant a deeper inquiry into family members’ experiences, concentrating on the intricacies of their meaning making regarding trans-identity and transition. Somewhere in the sense-making process family members come up against conflicting concepts which function to create the meaning that a loved one is gone when in fact that person has not died. Yet, the ambiguous loss that surrounds a transition of sex/gender seems different than other noted types; that is, the trans person is not exactly absent in mind or body (barring estrangement) and yet something is lost. Zamboni (2006) found that parents of persons who are trans-identified often claim to feel the loss of a son or a daughter and speculates that it is a sex/gender identity that is grieved. However, to date the complexity of grieving a gender identity has not been explored. To begin to understand how sex/gender might be connected to the experience of ambiguous loss surrounding transition, the ways we understand, think about, and talk about sex and gender must be taken into account.
Cultural Discourses of Sex and Gender

Swidler (2001) argues that when we construct meaning for our experiences, we use culture as a resource, calling upon symbolic systems at our disposal. Accordingly, the ramifications of transition in families cannot be explored without attending to the cultural repertoire of meanings for sex and gender. In US culture, the dominant understanding of sex is that it is dichotomous and stable (Sloop, 2004). A person is either male or female, and no other legitimated categories exist (Butler, 2004). Persons whose bodies deviate from what are considered to be strict and clean sex categories are broadly called intersex/ed and historically have been subjected to normalization surgeries so that they may conform to the dualistic model (Preves, 2002). Hubbard (1996) suggests that this strict binary stems from the association between sex and reproduction and the natural complementarity of male and female parts, which is reinforced by Western religions.

This model anchors the dominant cultural conceptualization of gender, as well—that there are inherent differences between men and women that cause them to behave differently and to have different interests, desires, skills, etc. Garber (1992) and Sloop (2004) argue that biological essentialism, or the view that gender follows from sex, has a strong presence in both scientific and popular culture. They cite public discourse surrounding the John/Joan case as evidence that essentialism is not only a strong ideology among scientists, but is integral to lay-person views of gender. In the John/Joan case, David Reimer, born a genetic male, was reassigned as female after an accident during circumcision damaged his penis. David was raised as Brenda into his teens but, according to reports, was always fighting the femininity that was forced on him by his parents and doctors. When David found out what happened, he began living as a male. The case was touted as proof that gender is determined by sex (Sloop, 2004).

From the biological essentialism perspective, trans-identified persons are also considered disordered (Looy & Bouma, 2005) as they do not conform to the notion that sex and gender are natural, aligned, and unchangeable. At times, trans persons are denied true membership in a sex category even after their bodies have been altered and/or they have been granted legal classification as such (Butler, 2004; Currah, 2008), which further demonstrates the sturdiness of biological essentialism. For example, in 2008 a news story about Thomas Beatie, a F2M trans person who was pregnant, drew much attention and controversy. A common public sentiment was denial of Beatie’s maleness—many felt he was not actually a man if he was able to get pregnant (Currah, 2008). This serves as further evidence that, in prevailing wisdom, sex is something with which we are born and is equated with genitalia and reproductive capacity (Sloop, 2004). Given the dominance of this view, it is no surprise that sex and gender figure among the primary ways we classify ourselves and others. Sloop (2004) argues that personhood is always sexed, citing public reactions to the case of Brandon Teena (a female-to-male trans person whose murder is considered a hate crime), in addition to that of John/Joan, where the need to pin down the person’s sex was at the center of controversy.
West and Zimmerman (1987) argue that while some roles can be taken on and relinquished as the context of social interaction changes, sex category functions as a master identity that cuts across social contexts, nearly impossible to relinquish. However, they argue that this fundamentality of sex/gender stems not from a biological fact, but from a cultural routine. They explain, “Rather than as a property of individuals, we conceive of gender as an emergent feature of social situations: both as an outcome of and a rationale for various social arrangements and as a means of legitimating one of the most fundamental divisions of society” (p. 126). This view that gender is the “cultural significance the sexed body assumes” (Butler, 1988, p. 524) can be described as a social constructionist model of sex and gender. Although social constructionism dominates social scientific and humanistic discourse on sex and gender, and is certainly a part of the cultural repertoire, biological essentialism seems to have a strong-hold in lay persons’ meaning-making processes (Sloop, 2004).

For those faced with renegotiating the identity of a trans-identified family member, cultural understandings of how sex/gender matter to personhood will be paramount. If they adopt the dominant view that male and female are naturally opposing, mutually exclusive categories of personhood, then it would seem that perceptions of transition would be riddled with incompatibility. That is, one person could not logically move from one category to the other and be the same person. On the other hand, if they adopt a social constructionist view, they could very likely end up in the same place; although gender is considered a social construct, it is still recognized as “one of the major ways that humans organize their lives” (Lorber, 1994, p. 101) and therefore is integral to our understandings of ourselves and others. To understand how family members make meaning for transition in the face of these complications, I employed Relational Dialectics Theory (RDT) (Baxter, 2011). Grounded in Mikhail Bakhtin’s work on dialogism, RDT provides a basis for understanding meaning making in light of contradiction. Further, a dialogic lens allows for a look at how ideologies are taken up, resisted, dismissed, or reworked as persons attempt to “construct and maintain a coherent, stable representation of reality” amidst discursive struggle (Broadfoot, Deetz, & Anderson, 2004, p. 197).

**Relational Dialectics Theory**

Relational Dialectics Theory rests on the premise that the social world is a system of competing discourses in which every utterance contains multiple voices that interplay. The aim of the theory is to understand how speakers engage disparate discourses to make sense of their relational experiences. Baxter (2011) calls us to go beyond identifying dialectical tensions to analyze the discursive struggle between centripetal and centrifugal discourses; in making meaning for an experience, speakers center some discourses and marginalize others. It is important to attend to the power involved in the process, since some ideologies hold a more central place than others in a culture’s symbolic landscape (Baxter, 2011). Baxter (2011, p. 123) explains, “The center is easily legitimated as normative, typical, and natural, and thus it functions as a baseline against which all else is somehow positioned as a deviation.”
However, even a dominant discourse carries echoes of its antithesis. Any utterance or turn at talk is part of a larger utterance chain, preceded by that which was uttered before and that which will follow (Bakhtin, 1981; Baxter, 2011). Baxter and Montgomery (1996) outline four links in this chain: proximal already and not-yet-spokens and distal already and not-yet-spokens. The proximal link refers to sites of meaning making that concern past, present, and future meanings of relationships constructed between partners. Distal already-spokens refer to the established ways of understanding an object or phenomenon, which speakers call upon to make meaning in daily talk. Speakers also attend to not-yet-spokens when they consider normative or dominant meanings or anticipate how a generalized other might respond to their words.

As family members make sense of transition at the distal sites, the cultural models of sex/gender discussed provide context for their talk, serving as both prior utterances and the basis for anticipated responses (Baxter, 2011). With a focus on these distal links, I outlined three research questions, the answers to which are important to understanding how and why transition might be experienced as a living death: (1) What is the object of grief related to transition; that is, what competing meanings anchor the dialectic of presence–absence surrounding trans-identity and transition?, (2) How do family members construct meaning for transition in light of such contradiction?, and (3) How does the interplay of competing discourses involved in these constructions relate to the experience of ambiguous loss?

Methodology

Interviews are ideal for exploring distal sites of the utterance chain; with no relational history between the interviewer and themselves from which to draw, participants must rely on shared meaning systems to make stories clear (Baxter, 2011). I conducted 37 interviews (ranging from 36–102 minutes) with persons who consider themselves family of those who had taken at least one step toward transition. Participants were recruited via personal contacts, support groups, and support websites, and snowball sampling was utilized. Many of the interviewees were parents of adult trans persons, but the sample also included several parents of young trans children, adult children of trans persons, brothers and sisters to trans persons, and current and former spouses/partners of trans persons. I began by asking participants to narrate their experiences, then asked follow-up questions, including experience questions (Spradley, 1980) (e.g., did you feel conflicting emotions?), example questions (e.g., was there a change that was particularly hard?), and compare–contrast questions (e.g., how is having a son different than having a daughter?) (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). I reached saturation (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) at interview 28, but collected more data to ensure the validity of themes.

I analyzed interview transcripts using contrapuntal analysis (Baxter, 2011), a form of discourse analysis wherein the researcher must identify competing discourses, show their opposition, and demonstrate the discursive struggle in which meaning is created. Before this, researchers should prime themselves to recognize themes by...
formulating one or more broad analytic questions regarding meaning. Mine was: *What does transition mean for the trans person’s identity?* When a segment spoke to this question it was marked as a possible theme. Once a theme was established, each notable datum was compared to it. If it fit, it was included; if distinct, it became a new category (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Themes were eventually organized as elements of discourses. For instance, initial themes concerning identity were labeled same vs. different, self inside vs. outside, and here vs. gone. Later, it became clear that these kernels form opposing discourses of self, which in turn make up a struggle over the continuity of identity with regards to transition. To determine that discourses were competing, I looked for signs of contradiction outlined by Baxter (2011): *Negating* is accomplished when a discourse is acknowledged, directly or indirectly, only to be rejected. *Countering* occurs when a speaker replaces a dominant discourse with another using words like *but* and *surprisingly*. Finally, *entertaining* happens when a speaker depicts a discourse as one of several possible views using words like *might* and *could*. Next, I turned to the interplay.

Baxter (2009) characterizes communication as a spectrum of interplay (Figure 1). One pole represents *monologue* where an authoritative discourse silences others (Bakhtin, 1981). In the middle of spectrum is *double-voiced dialogue* (Bakhtin, 1984) where at least two meanings are present, directly or indirectly. *Diachronic separation* occurs when the centered meaning varies across time or context. *Synchronic polemic interplay* is characterized by more explicit jockeying of multiple discourses at a given time. The pole opposite monologue represents *transformative dialogue*, where competing discourses are positioned so that struggle ceases and new meaning emerges in the form of a *hybrid* or an *aesthetic moment* (Baxter, 2011). A hybrid occurs when rival discourses are situated as compatible, yet retain their integrity. Baxter and Braithwaite (2008) explain, “The discourses (oil and vinegar) are distinct, yet they combine to form a new meaning—salad dressing” (p. 354). Aesthetic moments are transformative in that the discourses themselves are reconstructed, as in a chemical reaction; “Two molecules of hydrogen combine with one molecule of oxygen to produce an entirely new entity—water” (p. 355).

To identify these types of interplay, I looked for discursive practices that work to either center or marginalize discourses. Some are dialogically contractive and establish or sustain the dominance of a discourse. For instance, when a meaning is

![Figure 1 Spectrum of communication.](image-url)
naturalized, it is touted as “the way things are,” leaving little room for argument. Similarly, camouflaging acts to present a view as objective and difficult to challenge. This is often done via proclaiming, in which a speaker invokes an authority. A discourse can also be disqualified when a speaker denies its legitimacy by showing those who endorse it as lacking expertise or experience. Similarly, meanings can be subjectified, framed as merely opinion, easily dismissed. In contrast, dialogically expansive practices create space for other views. In addition to entertaining, attributing uses reported speech to introduce alternative meanings (Baxter, 2011). Along with identifying forms of interplay in the data, I attended to the sense-making work such interplay accomplished. Once I had completed a significant portion of analysis, I ensured its quality by checking for transferability and dependability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Analysis is transferable when it rings true for members of the population, and so I engaged in member checking with two participants (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002) who validated my analysis. Analysis is dependable when others can readily see how a researcher got from one point to another. For this, I engaged in peer debriefing with three colleagues trained in contrapuntal analysis, each of whom validated the logic of my analysis and interpretations (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Results

The renegotiation of meaning with regard to identities and relationships was central to participants’ experiences with transition, and consequently their emotional well-being. Some said explicitly, and others implied through talk of grief that the concepts of male and female are incompatible, at least as they are predominantly conceived of in US culture; seemingly, one person cannot be both, but one or the other. This apparent incongruity can bring about a sense ambiguous loss when sex/gender are transitioned. The experience of loss as a response to these changes reveals a tight imbrication of sex, gender, and identity.

It was in the tangles of these connections that participants had to work out what transition meant to them, how their relatives/partners did or did not fundamentally change because of it, and how these meanings affected their relationships. In this process, participants invoked the cultural discourses at their disposal. The meanings they made for transition were not only comprised of competing discourses related to sex/gender, but of those related to understandings of the self. Participants talked about their relatives/partners as the same and different and as “still here” and “gone” because of transition. At times, they claimed the self exists on “the inside,” in the mind, soul, or heart, and so a person remains the same despite transition. Other times, they indicated feeling loss when the “outside” of the person changed, reasoning that the person they once knew was gone. These themes reflect two ways of conceptualizing the self, as sovereign or social, respectively. Each has a presence in US culture (Carbaugh, 1989; Dunne, 1996; Gecas and Burke, 1995; Mason-Schrock, 1996; Mead, 1934; Synnott, 1992).
The discourse of the sovereign self holds that identity is inborn in some combination of the mind and soul and is independent of the body. Therefore, a sovereign self stays intact through transition. Audrey’s talk constructs the self as sovereign when she refers to her fiancé’s transition from male to female: “It’s not like the person I cared about on the inside is changing, it’s just the outside changing. Doesn’t really make a difference” (Interview #5). In contrast, the discourse of the social self surfaced when participants referred to the transitioned person as different, implicating changes to “the outside,” or the observable body and behaviors as proof. A social self is neither inborn nor immune to influence, but is malleable, thus, material and observable changes imply change in self. Nora’s talk demonstrates this conceptualization: “I’ve got pictures of when he was my daughter, some of my favorite pictures, and to look at that and to look at him now it’s two totally different people” (Interview #28).

Of course, in the context of trans-identity, these discourses of self were deeply intertwined with discourses of sex/gender. Participants’ talk reproduced two existing discourses discussed above—biological essentialism and social construction—and at times reworked an existing discourse in a way that created a new one. Through the interplay of these discourses, family members constructed four different meanings for transition through which they made sense of their loved ones’ identities. Transition was framed either as a process of replacement, revision, evolution, or removal. These frames rested upon the discursive unification or separation of the self and sex/gender, and constructed transitioned persons as either different, the same, both the same and different, or as essentially unaffected by transition, respectively. Below, each construction is explained, exemplified, and discussed relative to ambiguous loss.

Replacement

Transition as replacement means that family members talked of their trans-identified relative/partner as a different person because of transition. In communicating this, participants’ talk was largely anchored by biological essentialism, in which sex/gender is natural, binary, and a fundamental component of personhood. When male and female are conceived of as opposite categories of personhood, transition from one to the other functions as a replacement of one person with another. In other words, someone who changes from male to female cannot be the same person, because men and women are fundamentally different. Therefore, once biological essentialism was centered, so was the discourse of the social self. Ava, the 31-year-old mother of a young F2M child, constructed transition as a replacement. Asked what she thought was the cause of her grief, she replied (Interview #24):

I think because at one time I had this blonde haired, blue-eyed daughter and now I have a blond haired, blue-eyed son. And so, it’s like the person doesn’t exist anymore. I mean, even when I look at pictures of Regan as a girl I don’t recognize them. I don’t- I remember her, but I look at her as a different person because, I don’t know why, it’s kind of hard to explain, but it definitely feels like it’s a different
person. When we look back at the person, what it used to be, you don’t know that
person anymore. I don’t see her anymore, the little girl that was so beautiful and
had little white sandals and little dress and beautiful long blonde hair. She’s gone! I
mean, I didn’t get to see her become a 4-year-old little girl, or a 5-year-old little girl.
She only made it to a 2 ½ or 3 and then all of the sudden it became a boy, the boy
kind of grew and grew. The girl never did. So, you grieve over the girl you thought
you had. That little girl never grew up. Where’d she go? It’s like she doesn’t exist
anymore. You grieve over it.

Ava’s talk indirectly negates the idea of a sovereign self, true and stable, by
centering the (sexed) social self. She says that her daughter no longer exists because
she cannot see her, i.e., gendered changes caused erasure of a whole person. At this
point for Ava, when a girl becomes a boy, the person is fundamentally changed. Even
though this child is still physically and mentally present, qualitative changes provoke
loss and grief for this mother. Another example of the replacement construction
comes from Catherine, 43-year-old partner of a M2F trans person. Catherine’s talk
shows the practice of attributing as she uses reported speech to voice the discourse of
the sovereign self. However, she then counters it in favor of the discourse of the social
self (Interview #33):

... people have told me, when they try to give me advice—and I understand that
they’ve never been through it and they’re trying to make me feel better... “Oh, it’s
the same person, just their physical body is different.” And that wasn’t necessarily
true. I mean, because the personality changes... I had psyched myself up for “Oh,
it’s just gonna be an appearance change.” Then, when the personality change came,
I felt grief. Brett is gone and he’s never coming back and the appearance just made
that seem clear. So, there’s no going back. Brett is gone. And our church group, we
had a funeral. It was very helpful.

Catherine’s talk demonstrates that, for her, the self is social and so when appearance
and behaviors change, one person is gone and another takes his place. She indicates
that she knows advice-givers are trying to “make her feel better” by saying her partner
is the same person, implying that privileging the sovereign self might help to alleviate
grief. Catherine, however, sees transition as a living death and even says Brett was
given a funeral. The fact that the ceremony helped her cope implies that the formal
observance of Brett’s leaving brought a needed sense of closure, perhaps by relieving
feelings of ambiguity.

Both Catherine’s and Ava’s talk echoes biological essentialism. Elyse’s talk, however,
shows how social constructionism also lends itself to the meaning of transition as
replacement:

... we do gender from the moment we are born... “Okay, I had a baby.” “Oh, did
you have a boy or a girl?” “Okay, I know what toys I’m gonna buy and how I’m
gonna interact with my kid... how I’m gonna raise them to be either strong or
nurturing.” We’re trained to be this one person. And especially since we have these
two different roles people associate this, masculine or feminine, with I guess like the
very essence or soul of that person. So, I feel like they’re [relational partners of trans
persons] like, “You’re ripping out their soul and you’re putting in a different one.”
(Interview #19)
It seems that operating from either the biological or social discourse of sex/gender, male and female can be conceived of as incompatible; hence, centering either of these can incite loss.

Revision

While some family members conceptualized transition as replacement and therefore grieved the loss of a person, others framed transition in ways that allowed for grief to be avoided or overcome, at least partially. Transition as revision is not a change of a person, but a change of: (1) the outward identity of the trans person, and (2) the family member’s perception of who that person is as male or female. Both are revised to accurately reflect the internal, true self of the trans person. In this construction, the trans-identified person is the same through transition because that person had always been a member of the post-transition sex category (e.g., M2F had always been female). However, the family member(s) was not aware of this fact and so had been orienting to the person wrongly. In short, transition is framed as a change in superficial things (e.g., appearance, behavior, perception), so there is no reason to grieve the loss of an individual. The construction of revision seemed to aid in family members’ adjustment to transition.

This meaning construction was achieved through a complex form of interplay yet to be documented by dialogic scholars that I call extracting. Extracting occurs when a speaker voices an established discourse, but removes a component of the meaning system, and so, reworks it. This extraction remakes the discourse so that it becomes compatible with other cultural discourses from which the speaker draws, and the localized meaning being constructed. Speakers take what makes sense to them from an existing discourse and discard what does not. This might not seem transformative, but if the discarded piece is a core, defining component of the meaning system, then the discourse is qualitatively altered. Less transformative extractions may occur, but in this case the change of a piece changed the whole, creating a new biological essentialism through which participants made meaning of sex/gender and transition. The new discourse matches the original in every way but one: the body does not determine sex; true sex is found in the mind. This arrangement of meaning upholds the natural binary of sex/gender, but shifts them from the reproductive, physical realm to the psychological realm of felt identity.

Many participants engaged in extraction. The challenge they faced is this: working from either biological essentialism or social construction, sex/gender define who we are, whether because they are natural or are made to seem so. In privileging either of these established discourses, transition seemingly means one will feel the loss of a person. One way participants bypassed this was to reclaim the discourse of biological essentialism. They did so by discounting anatomy, chromosomes, and hormones as indicators of sex in favor of psychological identity. Consequently, if the mind and body are misaligned, the body is defective, not the mind. Otherwise, the sovereign self would lose its currency, making transition necessarily an experience of loss. The following examples show how extraction afforded participants the privileging of a
new biological essentialism, and therefore the sovereign self. This allowed for a reframing of transition from an experience of loss to a realization and correction of a mistake.

Amber, mother of an M2F child, told me that mind defeats body when I asked if she felt she had a son and now has a daughter or if she feels she always had a daughter. She said, “I always had a daughter, with a penis. We were wrong.” These statements reflect both endorsement of the naturalness of sex/gender (one can be wrong, therefore there is a Truth) and a belief that the body is not what dictates these. Later, her talk shows camouflaging when “new essentialism” is presented as objective via the authority of the American Academy of Pediatrics:

Yep, the American Academy of Pediatrics—have you seen their article about gender identity? It talks about by the age of 4 a child’s identity is stable. So, if they’re saying, “I’m a girl” and they have male parts, yeah, they’re a girl with male parts. (Interview #18)

Gabbie, mother to a F2M child, told me how she caught her child talking to his reflection, saying “You’re such a handsome boy.” Her talk engages the established nature/nurture discourses in direct, synchronic interplay, yet instead of centering either, she presents a caveat which transforms traditional essentialism to a version more apt for her meaning-making process:

I thought, “This is more than a tomboy, this is more than a lesbian in the making…this kid’s confused.” So… I sat on the edge of the tub and said, “You know, listen, Rosalie,” that was the name at the time, “you’re a beautiful person and you’re a wonderful person and I love you deeply, but you are a girl. You have a vulva and a vagina. You’re a girl. Jared [Rosalie’s brother] has a penis, he’s a boy.” As if that’s what makes us a boy or a girl—that’s what I thought then. (Interview #27)

First, Gabbie dismisses the social construction view of sex/gender, showing this is irrelevant to her child’s identity when she says “this is more than” gender bending. She then voices traditional biological essentialism in telling how she corrected her child by explaining that having a vulva and vagina made Rosalie female. Immediately after, she rejects this discourse as well saying, “As if that’s what makes us a boy or a girl.” With this caveat, Gabbie’s talk shows extraction in that the physical body, specifically the genitalia, is discarded as a valid indicator of sex. Here, she alludes to a new understanding of sex, “At least that’s what I thought then,” and later said explicitly that the mind’s gender identity is what makes someone male or female.

Evolution

Another way that participants made meaning of transition and the trans person’s identity that helped them to overcome or lessen feelings of loss was as an evolution of one person. An evolution means that one person is progressively changing in a way that “the before” leads into and is part of “the after.” In effect, a transitioned person is basically an updated version of the same self. To construct this meaning, discourses had to be positioned in such a way that trans persons could be both the same and
different, so the tension between the sovereign and the social discourses of the self had to be neutralized. Further, meanings of *male* and *female* had to be positioned as divergent yet compatible, such that they still exist as two separate kinds of people, but also that one person can legitimately progress from one to another. In short, in thinking of transition as evolution participants constructed *male* and *female* as somehow mutually exclusive yet not irreconcilable (i.e., one person can occupy both identities, just not at the same time). This neutralization occurred when participants’ talk created a *hybrid*, where competing discourses are unchanged, but the contradiction between them is eliminated (Baxter, 2011).

John, the 59-year-old father of a M2F child, told me that he now feels he has a daughter. I asked, “So, then do you feel the son you had before is gone or how do you reconcile that?”

Um... no, well the son I had is no longer with me, but the son I had is still available in the past. And I don’t have to feel like that son is gone, it’s just going forward, that son is gonna transform... So, in many ways, I don’t feel like I’ve lost a son, you know, I’ve gained a daughter. But, uh, all of the past experiences are still there and this doesn’t really alter them.

John’s talk is transformative in that the competing discourses of self are made to coexist. John’s talk makes it plausible that he can both not lose a son and gain a daughter through transition. The sense-making device that creates this neutralization between the sovereign and social discourses is the idea that his son still exists, but only in memories that are his to retrieve and reference. Lilly, the 42-year-old mother of a F2M trans-identified teenager also demonstrated hybridization in her talk about transition. I gave voice to the competing discourses of self, asking Lilly if she sees her child as the same or a different person, but she did not center either. Instead, her talk transformed them. Lilly’s utterance positions them not as meanings she must decide between, but that can be centered equally and simultaneously:

> Something I’ve struggle with a little bit. For me, Lacey is who Kyle used to be. Not that she never existed, because this was *my* child—my only natural child. And so, denying that part of her would be wrong... So, the same person conceptually for me. Kyle is still who Lacey was. I don’t even know how to put it. I look at the pictures and I know that that’s who he was. And he’s evolved to this person now and this is who he is. It’s sort of like an evolution, for me. Not that this child never existed, not that this child was never female—yes he was—that is a fact. This is a fact of his life. This is who was born to me. And so, now my child has evolved to be this person. This is who my child has grown up to be... I don’t know if that makes sense. I won’t let him deny that this was his past, this is who he was, it will always be a part of him... so for me, it has to be an evolution. An evolution doesn’t mean that the past goes away—it means that’s where you started from and this is where you are now. (Interview #26)

As is the case with hybrids, contrary discourses are still identifiable in Lilly’s explanation. She says that Kyle is the same person, post-transition, but also refers to who Lacey *was* and who Kyle *is*, depicting Kyle and Lacey as discrete. Lilly says that Lacey is who her child used to be in the past, but that does not mean that Lacey is...
gone, and in this sense Lilly does not see Lacey as erased/replaced, but instead sees two identities interwoven without dissolving completely into one. For Lilly, transition is the evolution of a person and of sex/gender; male and female are still distinct identities, but persons can evolve from one to another.

**Removal**

The final meaning construction in participants’ talk can be described as *removal*. In employing either (new) biological essentialism or social construction, there is ostensibly no way around thinking of personal identity and relationships as gendered. To bypass this, one would have to steer clear of the intersection of identity and sex/gender, creating new meanings in which sex/gender are irrelevant to personhood. The removal construction achieves this via the most fully transformative type of interplay, an aesthetic moment. When an aesthetic moment occurs, struggle between competing discourses is not merely neutralized, but the discourses themselves are altered or superseded; a new meaning is created that exists outside of established cultural discourses, which in turn lose relevance. Contradiction is not diffused but is circumvented.

Participants whose talk demonstrated aesthetic moments held either that sex/gender are not relevant to personal identity and therefore a change in them has no effect on who a person is or that personhood is not necessarily sexed/gendered at all, but a person can be neither male or female. Both of these forms of removal sidestep the contradiction of male and female. These aesthetic moments effectively removed sex/gender from the formula for identity, creating a non-sexed/gendered self. Like the other types of transformative interplay, this allowed for an avoidance or alleviation of the feeling that a person was lost through transition.

Olivia, the 29-year-old daughter of a M2F trans person showed that she had experienced a change in meaning-making of the experience of her parent’s transition. In the immediate aftermath of disclosure and transition, she felt grief:

> My soul was shaking in my body... the next few years I had very intermittent, very difficult contact with my parents. Partly because I felt I had been betrayed, partly because I felt as if my father had died, but was still there. And it was very confusing. I didn't have any sense of closure... I don't know this person anymore!

Olivia perfectly captures the experience of ambiguous loss when she says she felt her “father had died, but was still there.” At the time Olivia privileged the social self discourse. She elaborates:

> So, I definitely went through all the stages of grief during that and it was odd because there was no closure. She was still there. And how do I reconcile losing my dad but keeping my dad at the same time? Because I wasn’t recognizing her personhood.

Here, Olivia indicates that at some point she realized transition did not have to be a replacement of one person for another, but that there are other ways of understanding the self that would change the experience for her. Olivia explains why she
felt grief at first, saying, “because I wasn’t recognizing her personhood.” This implies that she now thinks it is wrong to consider sex/gender primary to personhood and that a change in them is not a change in person. Here, she shows how she came to understand the transitioned self as the same: by removing sex/gender from her conceptualization of the self, making them superfluous to its integrity. By dismissing the established discourses of sex/gender, Olivia can know that her parent is the same person, despite transition, since the (non-sexed/gendered) core of the self is continuous. Olivia’s apparent shift in interplay over time represents what Baxter (2011) calls diachronic separation. When asked what advice she would give to others, Olivia addressed directly how meaning-making affects the experience of transition:

I think it’s very important to question why you are having such a hard time . . . Or if you’re having an easy time with it, why are you having an easy time with it? What is it that you understand about what it means to be an individual? It’s the existence vs. essence thing. Who are you essentially? And how does that influence your existence? (Interview #22)

A different kind of removal was demonstrated by Roxy, a 59-year-old mother of an F2M teenager. Like Olivia, she described first feeling grief when she felt her female child as gone:

I realized that I have always made presumptions that who Jackson was, was female . . . And for a while I would say definitely I was in the “I lost a daughter, but I gained a son” because it took me a while to learn about, “well, what would that mean?”

Roxy then explained that Jackson passes as male easily, and that while this made it easier for her to think of him as male (as he wishes), sex has become irrelevant to her perception of Jackson:

And those physical changes were very confirming for me of “this is my kid, who is male, therefore he is my son,” but there’s kind of a beautiful integration where I just think of him in a way as Jackson. (Interview #21)

Eventually, Roxy began to conceptualize her child as neither male nor female. Interestingly, she describes the transformative dialogue as beautiful. Aesthetic moments are thought to be pleasing in that they abolish the struggle between competing discourses (Baxter, 2011).

Grieving Gendered Meanings

Even when family members made sense of transition as revision, evolution, or removal, conceptualizing the transitioning/ed person as the same, they invariably told me they still felt some amount of loss related to gender—loss of their loved one’s gender identity (even as it was shucked from the core self), loss of gendered expectations for that person’s future, loss of a particular gendered relationship they shared before, and/or, loss of their own gendered identities in relation to their relatives/partners. Bianca, mother of a M2F trans person (Interview #11), told me about her ex-husband’s reaction to their child’s transition, illustrating how the reconceptualization of gender can challenge relationships. She said, “My husband was
obviously shaken... He said, ‘I love him as my son. I don’t love him as my daughter.’”

Similarly, Ruth (Interview #32), mother of a F2M trans person, explained feeling loss over the meaning of daughter and the gendered relationship she had with that daughter, even though she maintained she did not lose a child:

The first thing you learned about your child was “It’s a girl!” which really sets up a lot of expectations, which I had just never really thought about before... I definitely feel still that I lost a daughter (voice breaks) and I haven’t quite worked through that. I don’t even really know what that means. It’s a concept. It’s an idea (laughs). It’s not a person. I didn’t lose my child, so it’s just sharing what mothers and daughters share that isn’t there.

Carter, father of a F2M trans person, described loss related to gendered expectations for his child’s life as he recounted his emotional response to transition (Interview #32):

A lot of the emotions that come with grief... the loss of your imagined future for your child completely gets turned on its head... of course, I always imagined that someday I would walk Olive down the aisle and she would get married to some nice man and um, we’d have grandchildren at some point. So, those kinds of things were—the loss of that imagined scenario was very real. I felt like I had lost a daughter in the things that normally would come with having a daughter. So, yeah, she was the only daughter I had.

Carter’s references to things that normally come with having a daughter illuminate how deeply gendered are the dominant understandings of identity. He says “of course” he expected to walk his daughter down the aisle, implying that this is a normative and sound assumption. Roxy’s description of grieving a gendered meaning was quite lucid. She even explains that she had to put effort into constructing a new meaning for her child’s identity.

What I really was grieving was a shell of a dream that had vanished. I mean, it was gone. The idea that Jackson would grow up as a woman, I had to lose that dream and all those expectations. And they were so deep. There were layers and layers... of femininity built into my association with him as a gender-based human being. So, through a lot of emotional and intellectual work, I replaced layer by layer... but it took a lot of time.

Roxy’s words show that even with effort, reframing can be difficult when discourses are powerfully connected. Aaron, the 70-year-old father of a F2M trans person, explained that his grief came from not just losing a daughter, but losing his own identity as a daughter’s father:

When Tim transitioned and became, and identified as a homosexual male, it was difficult for me... What was more deeply seeded emotionally was how I identified myself as a loving, protective father of a cute little girl and I retroactively lost that identity and in a sense lost the experience even though I had lived through it. Suddenly, I didn’t have it anymore in my past, which sounds counterfactual, but that’s how it felt. (Interview #13)

Aaron describes almost an erasure of the past when he had to reconceptualize his child. He went on to describe how he felt their relationship changed after transition:
As I started trying to think of him as a male it was just, it raised all kinds of cognitive dissonance with my memories of him as a cuddly little girl...gender bifurcation is built into our language, our pronouns, our sentence structure, and thus into our thought processes—it’s the paradigm that we start out with from childhood...the fact of the matter is that men relate to women in gendered terms...There’s no way in the world that I could relate to a woman and a man in the same way. It’s just not in my repertoire.

Aaron’s talk eloquently draws out the presence of sex/gender in the social world, pointing to the reason why transitions and meaning shifts are challenging for many. He clearly shows the incompatibility of gendered meanings when he says that he experienced cognitive dissonance in trying to think of his biologically female child as male. Finally, Audrey, the wife of a M2F trans person, said that her spouse was still the same person, but that she dealt with the loss of a traditionally masculine husband and a traditionally gendered marriage:

Well, I mean it was also the roles [in addition to the physical changes]. I mean, a male normally takes the lead in the family, he normally handles some responsibilities that the female wouldn’t and at that point like it was more kind of like a 50/50, but I was hoping I’d be able to rely on a male. I’d always grown up with like my grandparents, they were old style, like my nanny always stayed home with us and the males, grandpa went out and got the money. That’s my ideal life, that’s kind of what I wanted, and I felt like I was losing all hope of that. (Interview #1)

Even with the most transformative meanings, ambiguous loss is a salient experience. This persistence can only be due to the fact that our social world is a staunchly gendered one.

**Discussion**

When sex and gender are jostled and made relevant through transition, we may be faced with re-examining what these constructs mean to identity and relationships. Grounded in the gendered meanings of personhood, the apparent opposition of *male* and *female* was problematic for family members as they made sense of their loved ones’ transitions. Facing this ostensible incongruity, they constructed diverse meanings for transition and for the trans person’s identity through various arrangements of cultural discourses. These meanings captured a range of understandings of how sex and gender relate to personhood, something participants may have only considered once it was made relevant by trans-identity. While some suffered the ambiguous loss of a loved one, many engaged in transformative interplay, overcoming or avoiding the full extent of grief by transposing the loss from a person to something less significant. These participants indicated, however, that they were only able to achieve such framings with time and sense-making effort. Even with such rearranging, they described still feeling some degree of grief over gendered family relationships, roles, and projections, like the meaning of son, a sisterhood, a daughter’s prom or pregnancy, a traditionally gendered marriage, or the identity of a big brother to a little sister. The mourning of gendered left-overs illustrates that at
least in our well-established meanings of self, sex and gender are not throwaway features, but master identities (West & Zimmerman, 1987).

However, even monologic discourses are not unshakable. Broadfoot et al. (2004) explain that “…due to the evolving sociohistorical conditions in which discourses emerge and exist, there are always discursive elements that exist outside a discursive formation yet to be sutured, highlighting the always incomplete nature of any discursive formation” (p. 196). These data show that when available discourses, even authoritative ones, create for us a sense of confusion, discomfort, or worse, we can transform them or use them in new ways to “…fashion what appear to be coherent, complete…worlds out of essentially hidden, partial and fragmented pieces of discourse” (Broadfoot et al., p. 195). The ability to do so is not inconsequential. Although well-being was not measured in the present study, the demonstrated link between communication and emotional welfare cannot be ignored. Participants often indicated that feelings of grief were overcome when they found a different way to make sense of the relationship between selfhood and transition, one that did not involve the replacement of one person with another. Such constructions allowed for a more settling orientation to the experience of transition. The reprieve from grief was often implicated as leading to greater willingness and ability to support trans-identified persons as well as to better relationships.

The importance of meaning construction to well-being has been established in research on narrative coherence (Baerger & McAdams, 1999; Pennebaker & Seagal, 1999). Narrative coherence has been shown to be especially important in overcoming non-normative life events or disruptions (Becker, 1997), for example, in experiences of loss (Neimeyer & Levitt, 2000). The present study adds to the body of scholarship demonstrating the importance of meaning-making to emotional health. Specifically, it illuminates the role of communication in ambiguous loss, showing it to be a source of the experience (i.e., discursive struggle), but also a resource for managing and even overcoming it. Beyond this, the study contributes to Relational Dialectics Theory in that it uncovered a new form of transformative interplay. Extraction was an important way that ambiguous loss was alleviated. Extraction is valuable when an authoritative discourse, like biological essentialism, defines social reality in a way that for some reason becomes problematic. Because extraction reworks an established discourse without totally dismissing it, it is a type of interplay likely to occur when the taken-for-granted is disrupted, when our identities or behaviors deviate from the norm (yet we still ascribe to the belief system(s) which establishes it), or when we must work within an authoritative system to bring about change.

The most important limitation of this study is a bias in the sample. Though encouraging, the experiences reported here do not represent the full range of those had by family members, as all participants were still involved in some kind of relationship with the trans persons they discussed. Further, a number of the participants were members of support groups. Perhaps the discourse that takes place within and that surrounds such support groups could result in particular meanings of transition that do not circulate elsewhere. A greater number of conversations with nonsupportive family members would have helped to paint a more complete picture.
of how families make sense of trans-identity and transition, and could help to uncover what, if any, meaning making strategies lead to relational dissolution. That said, the meanings constructed by these participants do well to create space for alternative understandings of trans-identities and transitions, and offer valuable insights into how family members might make sense of ambiguity and loss that might accompany transitions of sex and gender.

Notes

[1] Butler (1993) argues this toward a different end. Sex, she says, is always gendered, and therefore a separation of sex and gender is not quite possible. Once sex is understood as socially constructed “there will be no way to understand ‘gender’ as a cultural construct which is imposed upon the surface of matter, understood either as ‘the body’ or its given sex . . . ‘Sex’ is, thus, not simply what one has, or a static description of what one is: it will be one of the norms by which the ‘one’ becomes viable at all, that which qualifies a body for life within the domain of cultural intelligibility” (p. 2).

[2] Terms used to describe trans-identified persons are often contested and in flux. I present a list of terms and uses as an attempt to capture some trans identities, but by no means is this list definitive or exhaustive.

[3] For the most part, I will use a slash to combine yet distinguish the terms sex and gender. I do this for several reasons: (1) to respect the ways participants discussed the concepts, which was most often as either one in the same or inseparable, (2) to respect a variety of identity transitions. For example, some persons might consider their transitions to concern sex, while others might consider their transitions to concern gender. Others still might consider transitions to concern both or might see the two concepts as indistinguishable (i.e., transition may constitute for them a change in materiality, behavior, signification, or all of these). Finally, the slash is fitting for both a biological essentialist view of these concepts as well as a Butlerian view, both of which are relevant here.

[4] Although no culture is homogeneous, and certainly US culture is not, I am using US culture to refer to mainstream American culture. That is, the review of literature focuses on discourses to which most Americans have access (e.g., are present in popular media) and likely draw from in their meaning making, though the specifics of meaning making may vary by co-culture, class, race, education level, religious affiliation or other demographic characteristics.

[5] Butler (1993) argues that although categories of male and female are taken to be strict and clean categories, in fact, sex is “an ideal construct which is forcibly materialized” (p. 1) and that “bodies never quite comply with the norms by which their materialization is impelled” (p. 2). In other words, male and female are ideals that bodies only approximate. Therefore, all bodies represent variations in the manifestation of sex.

[6] Butler (1993) complicates this distinction in Bodies that Matter arguing that by regarding gender as cultural it becomes too easy to regard sex as natural when, in fact, it too is a cultural construct (see footnote 1 for more detail). While I agree with this reading, I find that when a social constructionist discourse appears in scholarly or popular discourse it most often takes the form of the less nuanced view that sex is biological/material and gender is cultural/performative. That was the case in the talk of my study participants, as well, when they gave voice to social constructionism. Therefore, when I refer to social constructionist discourse, I am identifying talk that depicts gender as social, and may or may not address sex as such.

[7] My analysis of participants’ discourse represents one interpretation of their experiences, and one that is unavoidably influenced by own identity as neither someone who is
trans-identified, nor a relative or partner of someone who is. Not only does this fact affect my reading of the data, but also unavoidably influenced participants' orientations toward me and, likely, their responses, since they were telling their stories not only to a researcher, but to one who is an outsider to the trans and SOFFA communities.

References


