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The Presentation of Trans in Everyday Life: An Autoethnographic Exploration of Gendered Performance

Elijah C. Nealy

Graduate Center, City University of New York

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The Presentation of Trans in Everyday Life:
An Autoethnographic Exploration of Gendered Performance

by

Elijah C. Nealy

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Social Welfare in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, The City University of New York

2014
This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in Social Welfare in satisfaction of the Dissertation requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Irwin Epstein

__________________________
Date

Chair of Examining Committee

Harriet Goodman

__________________________
Date

Executive Officer

SJ Dodd

Deborah Tolman

Salvador Vidal Ortiz

Supervisory Committee

The City University of New York
Abstract

The Presentation of Trans in Everyday Life: An Autoethnographic Exploration of Gendered Performance

by

Elijah C. Nealy

Adviser: Professor Irwin Epstein

The life experiences of transgender men are an understudied area in social work research. Given the negative experiences many transgender men have utilizing the medical and social service systems, greater understanding is needed about how these men negotiate their identities in an array of relational contexts. This dissertation uses autoethnography to explore how one transgender man navigates his identity as a man, father, and social work professional.

Viewed through the theoretical frame of Erving Goffman’s work, and in dialogue with masculinities studies and queer theory, this study finds that transgender men are continually negotiating their identities in varying relational contexts, even post transition. They face ongoing choices about self disclosure. Transgender men face constant challenges to their masculinity, even to their humanity. Transgender fathers challenge traditional notions of parenting. Out social work professionals face these complexities even among colleagues. Despite this, transgender men are remarkably resilient and find numerous ways to surmount the impact of stigma.
Practice implications include acknowledging the challenges to a trans man’s masculinity while helping him place it in the broader context of manhood in America, providing support for the many ways he is continually navigating his identity, creating opportunities for transgender fathers to connect and share resources, and nurturing the varied ways trans men thrive in the midst of pervasive stigma.
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A correctly staged and performed scene leads the audience to impute a self to a performed character, but this imputation – this self – is a product of a scene that comes off, and is not a cause of it. The self, then, as a performed character, is not an organic thing that has a specific location, whose fundamental fate is to be born, to mature, and to die; it is a dramatic effect arising diffusely from a scene that is presented, and the characteristic issue, the crucial concern, is whether it will be credited or discredited.

# Table of Contents

Chapter 1: Introduction

Discrimination and Its Impact 2
The Need with Social Work 6
My Study 9

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Identity Models 13
Critique of Identity Models 16
Relevant Transgender Studies 17
Theoretical Literature 24
  Early Ideas about Gender 24
  Early Men’s Studies 27
  Analysis of Power 29
  Social Construction of Masculinities 34
  Queer Theory 37
  Goffman and Stigma 39
Theoretical Framework 41

Chapter 3: Methodology

Foundations of Method 46
Autoethnography as Method 47
Researcher as Subject 48
Strengths of Autoethnography 50
Conducting the Study 53
Data Collection 54
Data Analysis 55
Evaluative Criteria 56
Critiques of Autoethnography 59
Relational Ethics and Protection of Human Subjects 60

Coming Out as Transgender: A Brief Autobiographical Sketch 63

Chapter 4: Coming Out as a Man 65
Identity Negotiated 65
Identity Contested 71
Identity Affirmed 80
Identity Reconstructed 90

Chapter 5: Coming Out at Home 98
Managing Information and Social Anxiety 98
To Pass or Not to Pass 108
Identity Management at Home: Stories of a Transgender Father 112
Chapter 1: Introduction

The term “transgender” is used to describe people who cross or transcend culturally defined categories of gender (Bockting et al, 2004; Davis, 2008; Green, 2004). Many such individuals were assigned one biological sex at birth, but live their lives to varying degrees as the opposite sex. They may or may not choose to socially or medically transition (Bornstein, 1994; Hird, 2002). Transgender is also an umbrella term used to describe the many different gender communities such as transsexual, bi-gendered, butch queen, cross dresser, drag king, drag queen, femme queen, FTM, male-to–female, pre-op(ervative), post-op, trans woman, trans man, or in Native American culture, two-spirit (Burdge, 2007; Lev, 2004; McPhail, 2008).

Individuals of transgender experience challenge our notions of gender normalcy and as a result, people who are gender different are stigmatized by the dominant culture. As early as childhood, many trans persons already experience significant rejection from family and peers, accompanied by feelings of alienation and hopelessness (Nemoto, Operario, & Keatley, 2005). This marginalization silences the voices of many transgender persons and renders their stories and lives invisible. The binary gender assumption marks trans persons as “other” and “queer.” It classifies them as gender transgressors and subjects them to shame, ostracism, hatred, verbal, physical and sexual assaults, and even murder. Experiences of transprejudice and transphobia include general misunderstanding and ignorance, objectification, and pathologizing a transgender person’s mental health or physical appearance (Singh, Boyd, & Whitman, 2010). In the face of this stigmatization, it’s no surprise that many transgender people struggle with self esteem problems and even suppress their true selves.
Transgender persons are typically judged for how well they “pass” within the binary lens of gender expression. Likewise they are routinely subjected to detailed and invasive questions about their physical bodies, particularly the size and shape of their genitals, and whether they have had sex reassignment surgeries or are involved in hormone treatments. These judgments “contribute to the perception that transgender persons are ‘others,’ rather than legitimate and valued members of our society” (Singh, Hays, & Watson, 2011). Negative reactions are endemic while a person is in the early stages of gender transition. However as Prosser (1998) notes, revealing one’s transgender history is always fraught with uncertainty and can be followed by disbelief, judgment, ridicule, or harm. Consequently discrimination, at the very least in the form of frequent microaggressions (Nadal, 2013) and sometimes in the form of verbal harassment or physical violence, may re-occur throughout a trans person’s lifetime, even when “post-transition” (Lombardi, 2009).

**Discrimination and Its Impact**

Qualitative and quantitative research documents the severe employment, housing, and health care discrimination that many transgender persons experience, including the ways these psychological, economic, and structural barriers place them at higher risk for poverty, violence, and HIV (Bockting et al., 1998; Clements-Nolle, Marx, Guzman, & Katz, 2001). The 2009 U.S. National Transgender Discrimination Survey (National Center for Transgender Equality (NCTE) & the National Gay & Lesbian Task Force (NGLTF), 2010) included nearly 6,500 transgender and gender-nonconforming respondents. Results indicated that nearly 50% reported adverse job situations as the result of their transgender status. This included 44% failing to obtain a job, 23%
being denied a promotion, and 26% fired from a job. Almost all respondents (97%) reported some form of mistreatment or harassment while employed. Unemployment rates were double those of the general population (with transgender people of color unemployed nearly four times more often) and survey participants were four times as likely to have an annual income below $10,000 than the general U.S. population.

Poor health outcomes for all categories of respondents in the 2009 survey (NCTE & NGLTF, 2010) demonstrate the pervasive effects of social and economic marginalization, including much higher rates of HIV infection (over four times the national average rate, with rates even higher for transgender people of color), and higher rates of smoking, drug and alcohol use and suicide attempts than the general population. Transgender people are less likely (40%) to have employer-based health insurance (NCTE & NGLTF, 2010) and discrimination is rampant in healthcare facilities. Nearly one-fifth of the sample was refused medical care due to their transgender or gender non-conforming status, with even higher numbers among people of color. Some 50% of the sample reported having to teach their healthcare providers about transgender care. In addition, survey participants reported that when they were sick or injured, many postponed medical care due to discrimination (28%) or inability to afford it (48%).

Transgender persons are at disproportionately high risk of violent hate crimes as they pursue their daily lives. One study of transgender persons in the United States indicated that approximately 60 percent had experienced some form of harassment and physical violence due to their gender identity (Lombardi et al, 2001). In a 2010 national report transgender people represented a higher proportion of hate violence survivors with injuries and were more likely to experience multiple forms of violence; transgender people and all LGBT people of color were two times more likely to experience assault than were their non-transgender white counterparts.
(National Coalition of Anti-Violence Programs, 2010). As Butler (2004) reflects, “the harassment suffered by those who are “read” as trans or discovered to be trans cannot be underestimated. They are part of a continuum of the gender violence that took the lives of Brandon Teena, Matthew Shepherd, and Gwen Araujo” (p. 6).

The concomitant stressors and social stigma can result in low self esteem, social isolation, and difficulty negotiating safer sex situations (Davis, 2008; Nemoto et al., 2004; Oggins & Eichenbaum, 2002). Numerous studies report increased rates of substance use, depression, and anxiety among transgender persons (Clements-Nolle et al. 2001; Xavier, Honnold, & Bradford, 2007). Suicide attempt rates are significantly higher among transgender persons (Clements-Nolle, Marx, & Katz, 2006; Grossman & D’Augelli, 2008; Kenagy, 2005); a recent national study indicated that 41% of the trans people surveyed had attempted suicide compared to 1.6% in the general population. Suicide rates were even higher for those who lost a job due to bias (55%), were harassed/bullied in school (51%), had low household income, or were the victim of physical assault (61%) or sexual assault (64%) (NCTE & NGLTF, 2010).

Transgender people often experience multiple losses associated with gender identity transitioning, including loss of employment and professional status, loss of social and class status, loss of housing, loss of partners, friends, family, religious identity, and many times, for transgender people of color, loss of ethnic or racial identity community connections (Hansbury, 2005).

In light of this, Meyer (2007) posits three critical minority stressors for LGB people that seem equally applicable to transgender persons. These are (1) external, objective stressful events and conditions; (2) the minority individual’s expectations of such events and the vigilance this expectation requires; and (3) the minority individual’s internalization of society’s negative
attitudes. Meyer goes on to note that these stressors are simultaneously unique (in that they are experienced in addition to every day stressors all human beings encounter), chronic, and socially based.

Despite these challenges, LGB persons [and this author suggests the same is increasingly true for transgender persons] have responded to these stressors with “resilience and resolve, forming varied and diverse communities that have created safe spaces, norms and values, and institutions where LGB [and trans] identity has been acknowledged, supported, and respected” (Meyer, 2007, p. 242). This may be in part because transgender identity is not only a source of stress but also can function as a moderator of stress and even a source of strength. This typically occurs when transgender identity is associated with” increased opportunities for affiliation, social support, and coping that ameliorate the impact of stress” (Meyer, 2007, p. 248).

Minority stress is also mediated by the salience and valence of one’s identity. Since all people, including transgender persons, have multiple aspects of their identity, the degree to which one’s transgender identity is salient in a specific social context may influence the degree of stress one experiences. Valence refers to the evaluation of one’s identity, one’s sense of self-validation. Persons with extremely negative valence likely experience greater stressors while persons with more positive valence are likely better able to cope with stressors (Meyer, 2007).

Given these challenges, it is not surprising that transgender persons might seek a variety of social work, health, and mental health care services. Needs assessment studies most often indicate a range of requested services, including basic health care, job training, employment assistance and placement, food subsidies, mental health counseling, and housing (Nemoto et al, 2005; Xavier et al, 2005). Surveys conducted in Philadelphia and Chicago indicated that
transgender men also sought help with family planning, parenting skills, and child care (Kenagy & Hsieh, 2005).

Most of these studies simultaneously report major barriers in accessing health and mental health care and services, including lack of provider knowledge about transgender health needs, lack of understanding and insensitivity about transgender life histories and experiences, outright refusal to treat transgender persons, demeaning experiences at treatment facilities due to transgender status, and fear of disclosing transgender identity to their care provider (Bockting et al, 2004; Kenagy & Hsieh, 2005; Xavier et al, 2005). These barriers are associated with higher levels of depression, lower self esteem, and increased health risks, including higher risk of HIV (Nemoto et al, 2005). Consequently it is clear that there is a critical need for more knowledge-based and competent social work services for transgender persons.

The Need within Social Work

Despite these assessments and the increasing visibility of the transgender community, the needs and concerns of this population are rarely represented in social work literature. Few graduate level social work courses offer education about the needs of transgender clients despite the fact that gender identity is a basic component of human development for all persons. Rarer still are the voices and perspectives of transgender social workers and educators themselves.

Studies show that many social workers are unfamiliar with the needs of transgender clients, may view transgender identity as pathological and aberrant, and are ill prepared to work sensitively and competently with this population (Kenagy, 2005; Bockting, et al, 2004). As Lev (2004) states, “Unaware of the therapeutic needs of transgendered … people, clinicians often
reflect back to their clients the same anxiety, depression, isolation, shame, and terror that their clients present to them. At worst, clients have been abandoned and ridiculed at times when they have been most in need of genuine compassion” (p. 19).

Given that gender dysphoria is considered a mental disorder, all transgender persons seeking medical care for transition must be diagnosed with a psychiatric illness (American Psychiatric Association, 2014). Consequently many existing studies have per force presented a pathological perspective on transgender identities and lives (Erich et al, 2010; Lev, 2004). Other studies have been focused on clinical populations, thus skewing results negatively. The focus has typically been on the mental health, substance abuse, HIV risk behaviors, and social service needs of the community. Yet other studies consistently show that there are no more mental health issues among transgender persons than other non-stigmatized groups and mental health concerns can be traced to the effects of stigma (Burgess, 1999; Lev, 2004). Hill (2005) notes that additional research about transgender persons is needed to alleviate the oppression this population experiences in both the helping professions and the community at large. Furthermore little has been written about the inherent strengths or resiliencies of transgender people (Singh et al, 2011).

Essential to effective social work practice with transgender persons is a focus on the community’s strengths and resiliencies despite the pervasive experiences of stigma and discrimination. In the past two decades, transgender people have increasingly come out as a visible group and have established their own education and support groups, community institutions, and advocacy organizations. Meyer (2007) concludes that group solidarity and cohesiveness often protects against the effects of minority stress. Group affiliation serves to increase coping by (1) providing environments in which one is not stigmatized but rather
affirmed, and (2) providing support for the negative evaluation of the minority group. He further notes that members of stigmatized groups who have a strong sense of community evaluate themselves in comparison with others who are like them as opposed to members of the dominant culture (p. 256).

Hill (2005) calls for more research that takes a wellness perspective and explores the positive dimensions of transgender people’s lives—“the successes, the joys, the pleasures of living a transgendered or transsexual life” (p. 105). Singh et al (2011) conducted a phenomenological inquiry about resilience strategies employed by transgender persons. The study generated five themes including (a) evolving a self-generated definition of self, (b) embracing self-worth, (c) awareness of oppression, (d) connection with a supportive community, and (e) cultivating hope for the future (p. 23). Recognizing resilience as both an individual and community asset, the authors call for further research along these dimensions, as well as studies regarding possible empowerment interventions in practice with transgender clients.

Hill (2005) urges clinicians to recognize transgender people as the “authorities on their own lives” (p. 103). Similarly in a recent Social Work article on practice with the transgender community, Burdge (2007) highlights the need for social workers to create forums for transgender people to tell their own stories and suggests that the details of these case studies will illuminate the nuances of what it means to be transgender (p. 249). She challenges researchers to create such spaces noting that “fundamental questions regarding social work's role with the transgender community remain unanswered, [such as], what do transgendered people want social workers to do? And, what are their lived experiences?” (p. 248).
**My Study**

This dissertation seeks to fill part of this gap in social work practice knowledge. Against the backdrop of my experience as a clinical social worker who spends hours each week listening to and sharing with transgender men, I utilized the narrative methodology of autoethnography to illuminate and explicate the day-to-day lived experiences of my life as a transgender man. While this lived experience includes the phenomenon of stigma, this study goes beyond the effects of stigma to highlight the strengths and resiliencies developed to successfully negotiate my identity in the social interactions of my day-to-day life.

Throughout the dissertation, I alternated between the use of personal narrative and existing theory to address the following questions:

- What insights does this transgender man’s story shed on dominant discourses about gender, given that he has lived both as a woman and a man?
- How is this trans man’s journey similar to and/or different from dominant narratives of masculinity in the United States? In what ways can his day-to-day encounters illuminate what it means to be a man in America?
- How does this trans man navigate his relationships with women, with other men, with his family? How does this trans man publically navigate his roles as a professional social worker and professor?

Ellis and Bochner (2000) define autoethnography as an “autobiographical genre of writing and research that displays multiple layers of consciousness, connecting the personal to the cultural”. As they state, it begins with an ethnographic wide-angle lens, focusing outward on social and cultural aspects of personal experience. It then looks inward, “exposing a vulnerable self that is moved by and may move through, refract, and resist cultural interpretations” (p. 739).
One value of this method is the way it provides “first-person details of a culture – details that help us understand and critique the social structures and processes constituting that culture” (Allen & Piercy, 2005, p. 162).

Reed-Danahay (1997) suggests that given their experiences living in both genders, trans people epitomize the multiple postmodern nature of selfhood. The autoethnographic method opens up new ways of writing about social life in our world. This kind of narrative inquiry, through its rich accounts of “the complexities of real life and an emphasis on the particular, can call into question dominant narratives that do not match the experience of life as lived” (Bathmaker, 2010, p. 3).

Autoethnography has an ethnographic interest in telling us about a culture. At the same time, it tells about one life within that culture with great depth and nuanced detail (Reed-Danahay, 1997). Through autoethnography the researcher is able to plumb the depth of his own experience – his own internal dialogue and emotions - in a way that he simply cannot unpack the experiences of other research participants. Given this, autoethnography allows an emotional complexity not easily available in other research methodologies. I believe this emotional complexity and vulnerability enables readers enter into my life story and then make connections with the more universal human experiences and emotions of their own lives. Given the way transgender people are predominantly viewed as different and “other,” autoethnography offers a unique ability to dismantle the boundaries between the researcher and their subject/other.

Bochner and Ellis (1996) posit that one major goal of autoethnography is to “open ethnography to a wider audience, not just academics but all people who can benefit from thinking about their own lives in terms of other people’s experiences” (p. 18). By producing more engaging and accessible texts, autoethnographic research holds the potential to reach more
diverse audiences than does traditional research, and thus make personal and social change possible for more people” (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011, p. 3).

This dissertation is firmly positioned in the heart of social work’s historic commitment to the inherent worth and dignity of all human beings and to equality and social justice for all persons. As the National Association of Social Worker’s Code of Ethics (NASW, 2008) states:

The primary mission of the social work profession is to enhance human wellbeing and help meet the basic human needs of all people, with particular attention to the needs and empowerment of people who are vulnerable, oppressed, and living in poverty... Social workers promote social justice and social change.... particularly with and on behalf of vulnerable and oppressed individuals and groups of people.

Furthermore, the dissertation supports and expands on the current National Association of Social Workers (NASW) position paper on transgender and gender identity issues (NASW, 2009) which states:

NASW recognizes the considerable diversity in gender expression and identity among our population. NASW believes that people of diverse gender – including all those who are included under the transgender umbrella – should be afforded the same respect and rights as that for any people. NASW asserts that discrimination and prejudice directed against any individuals on the basis of gender identity or gender expression, whether real or perceived, are damaging to the social, emotional, psychological, physical, and economic well-being of the affected individuals, as well as society as a whole, and NASW seeks the elimination of the same both inside and outside the profession, in public and private sectors.

Rooted in social work’s commitment to social justice, this dissertation draws on autoethnography to tell the story of my lived experiences as a transgender man in an effort to make the lives of transgender men everywhere more visible. Moving back and forth between the personal and the cultural, it seeks to describe the presentation of transgender experience in this researcher’s everyday life.
Green (1999) suggests that gender transition “opens so many windows on the gender system that we may be compelled to comment on our observations, which could not be made from any other vantage point than a transsexual (or maybe transgender) position” (p.123). Having spent much of my life being “read” as a gender queer butch lesbian/woman, I lived on the “margins” of sexuality and gender experiencing heteronormativity, homophobia, and sexism from the outside. Now moving through the world as a visible man, I have daily experiences of viewing these social dynamics and processes from the very center. I believe this history positions me to make a unique contribution to public conversations about gender and sexuality.
Chapter 2: Literature Review

This literature review offers an overview of the research and theoretical work that provided the backdrop for this dissertation. It covers both transgender studies and related other fields that helped shape the focus of this study. It begins by looking at identity models and empirical studies of transgender people with a focus on transgender men. From there it reviews relevant theory including gender studies, masculinities, queer theory, and symbolic interactionism.

Earlier clinical research on transsexual people during the late 1960’s – early 1980’s tended to focus on the etiology of transsexualism, with the theoretical literature seeking to explain it conceptually (Johnson, 2007). What followed in the late 1990’s was a collection of materials focused on processes of transgender identity development. These had been preceded by numerous linear stage lesbian and gay identity development models such as Coleman (1982), Troiden (1988, 1989), and Cass (1979, 1990, 1996).

Identity Models

Traditional theories about LGBT identity development evolved from essentialist paradigms about gender development and sexual orientation, in which both are viewed as fixed, stable aspects of identity (Eliason & Schope, 2007). These models held that sexual orientation was fixed early in life, though possibly hidden or unknown or unacknowledged among lesbian and gay persons. The models posited a series of stages lesbian and gay people passed through in response to social and environmental challenges. These factors were heavily influenced by
Goffman’s (1963) work on the way social stigma shapes a minority person’s identity leading typically to self-hate and self-derogation. These stage models focused on the healthy consequences of “coming out.” They outline a process of moving from a stigmatized identity to a more positive, empowered lesbian and gay identity/sense of self.

Sparked by these models of lesbian and gay identity development, more recent theorists began to articulate models for the development of transgender identity. Like lesbian and gay models, the transgender work focused on the sociologies of coming out, as well as the “subversion of identity” (Butler, 1990), and contrasting binary constructs of gender identity with a spectrum of identities (Connell, 2012).

Nuttbrock, Rosenblum, and Blumenstein (2002) studied male to female transsexuals and developed a four stage model of transgender identity and social relationships that included: (1) Identity awareness focused on self awareness and whether to begin disclosing identity to others; (2) Identity performance during which individuals begin to engage in “cross-gender” behaviors and activities; (3) Identity congruence in which significant others acknowledge one’s transgender identity; and (4) Identity support in which relationship partners respond (either supporting or rejecting) to one’s gender identity.

Gagne, Tewksbury, and McGaughey (1997) also studied transgender women and developed a four stage identity model that included: (1) Early transgender experiences which included a sense that their sex or gender was “not right”; (2) Coming out to oneself which is driven by a search for authenticity; (3) Coming out to others during which validation by significant others and a community of similar peers plays a key role in the stabilization of gender identity; and (4) Resolution of identity which follows a long period of self exploration. The
authors note that despite the intense “gender policing” found in Western culture, “the need to express a ‘true self’ was an overwhelming urge that could not be denied” (p. 504).

Rachlin (1997) posited a six stage transition process (note this is somewhat different from an identity development model) that included (1) distress and confusion, (2) self-definition, (3) identifying options, (4) acting to make changes, (5) coping with the consequences of transition, and (6) moving on with a life in which gender identity is not a central issue.

More recently Lev (2004) developed a six stage “transgender emergence” model which posits that the process of developing an authentic self for transgender people involves moving through an experience of emergence – of realizing, discovering, identifying, or naming one’s gender identity. The first stage is Awareness, the internal realization that one is transgender. This is followed by Seeking Information/Reaching Out to other transgender people. The third stage is Disclosure to Significant Others followed by Exploration about Identity and Self-labeling. The key issue is resolution of one’s gender dysphoria and acceptance of one’s gender identity. Stage Five focuses on the Exploration of Transition Issues involving consolidating one’s gender presentation and making decisions about possible body modification. Stage six is called Integration and Pride: Acceptance and Post-transition Issues.

Devor (1997) developed the most extensive identity development model for transgender men, outlining fourteen stages transgender men traverse. These begin with an unfocused sense of sex/gender discomfort, move through stages of identity confusion, comparison, tolerance, and acceptance and culminate with a sense of integration and identity pride.

In a more recent study on identity development among FTM transgender youth, Pollock and Eyre (2012) outlined three stages. In this model youth began to experience a growing sense of their own gender, as shaped by their peers at school, the onset of puberty, their emerging
sexuality, and exposure to other transgender stories. This was followed by a moment in which they recognized their transgender identity. The third stage is described as a time of social adjustment in which the youth is integrating their male identity and developing new ways of interacting with themselves and their world. For Pollock & Eyre’s (2012) participants, learning about the existence of other FTM transgender people was a critical link in recognizing their transgender identity, while pleasurable sexual interaction was the key to validating their emerging masculine identity.

**Critique of Identity Models**

Identity development stage models have been extremely helpful in thinking through the different steps LGBT people pass through in the course of establishing a positive sense of self. They are popular with clinicians because they easily lend themselves to the development of treatment guidelines for each stage.

However, there are numerous challenges to these linear-stage models (Eliason & Schope, 2007). One challenge is that sexual identities are a fairly recent construct and vary widely from one culture to another. Thus the models may not be applicable across varying cultural contexts. Furthermore, it is questionable how useful the models are for most LGBT people who have multiple identities – racial/ethnic, gender, sexual orientation, class, gender identity, etc.

Second, others wonder whether these models remain relevant in the face of enormous social changes (particularly visibility and acceptance) in regard to LGBT persons in our culture. The original models tended to assume that LGBT persons were isolated and in the “closet,” but
today many LGBT youth grow up with a plethora of visual images about queer people and numerous role models. Some younger people even question the very concept of “coming out.”

Third, these models are rooted in essentialist views that posit an underlying fixed sexual identity that has to be discovered and announced. Yet more recent queer theorists posit that gender identity (in fact, all identities) are fluid and “performative” - always tentative and fragmented – constructed by us based on our social-historical context in an effort to make sense of the constantly evolving nature of our lives (Butler, 2004; Wilchins, 2004). Fixed identities, while useful for political organizing, are often rigid and restrictive for the individual. Fixed binary identities make it clear that most lesbian and gay models offer little in the way of bisexual identity development and most transgender models struggle to remain relevant for gender-variant or gender queer people who choose not to transition.

**Relevant Transgender Studies**

Girshick (2008) completed a mixed-method study of 150 trans-identified individuals (male and female) through the use of surveys and interviews. The study explored transgender peoples’ process of identity development and decisions to transition, the challenges of coming out to family and colleagues in their communities, experiences of gender policing by the larger society, and the ways some transgender people worked through issues of shame, body dysphoria, depression, and self-destructive behaviors in order to reach a place of self-acceptance in their lives. Participants’ responses overwhelmingly indicated that gender identity represents a deeply felt, internal sense of self that they experienced as always having been there. At the same time, this sense of self was also experienced as an ongoing process of discovery. In reviewing the
study, Girshick advocates for moving beyond binary gender constructs, stating that “gender diversity is the liberation issue of our times” (p.189).

Hines (2007) conducted a descriptive study of transgender persons (male and female) in the United Kingdom using theoretical sampling to achieve maximum diversity in respondents. The interviews focus on themes of transgender identity development, the relationship between transitioning and sexual desire, intimacy and sexual practices, the impact of gender transition on relationships with partners, children, other family, and friends, and the practices of care and caregiving (such as transgender support groups) within the transgender community.

The participants’ narratives document both more essentialist and more performative aspects to their gendered identities. In addition, how the material body was “experienced, managed, and modified” was a prominent theme (Hines, 2007, p. 188). Their experience of transgender sexualities was often fluid, with the process of transitioning opening up a greater range of sexual expression.

Sanger (2010) conducted a qualitative study of thirty-seven transgender people and their intimate partners. Through the use of extensive interviews, the study explored the regulatory frameworks influencing their relationships, the varying manifestations of sexuality, their experiences of gendered identities, and the ongoing evolution of trans identity development and their negotiation of same within their partnerships. The study concludes with an ethics of intimacy both for use by transgender people themselves and for what trans voices might offer larger societal conversations about intimacy and relationships.

Devor (1997) completed the first extensive research project examining the lives of transgender men. His qualitative study included sections on early childhood gender experiences; adolescent experiences around gender identity, puberty, sexuality, identity development;
transitioning and coming out experiences; sexuality and intimate relationships; and how social relationships with men and women shifted post-transition.

Two overarching themes emerged from the interviews: namely the fact that “each of us has a deep need to be witnessed by others for whom we are, and each of us wants to see ourselves mirrored in others’ eyes as we see ourselves” (Devor, 1997, p. 46). This interactive process of witnessing by non trans people and mirroring by other transgender people is how our sense of self is reinforced. Validation by cisgender people (a term used to describe non-transgender people) serves as a powerful reinforcer of transgender identity. Conversely, when the larger world’s witness clashes with one’s self-perception, a “profound alteration or destruction of that self may appear to be the only option (ibid).” Transition – social and/or medical - enables others to see trans people as they see themselves. However as Devor points out, if we are only witnessed and never mirrored we feel isolated, as if we are the only one of our kind.

One strength of Devor’s (1997) project is that it highlights similarities in development tasks and challenges between transgender men and all human beings, suggesting that we all experience aspects of gender and sexual dysphoria (p. xxvii). As Devor comments, “Perhaps in the end, the biggest difference between transsexual people and other members of society lies not so much in the nature of the identity developmental and identity supporting processes through which they must pass, but in the anguish and consciousness with which they must negotiate them” (p. 608). Placing the emphasis on our similarities significantly counters the ways trans persons have historically been pathologized. At the same time, the study leaves room for more nuanced analyses of the unique aspects of trans men’s’ lives and the particular challenges they experience. The study also focuses more on social and external dynamics as trans men navigate
their coming out process and transition, and thus leaves a gap in regard to more inner, psychic processes and experiences (Elliot, 2009).

Methodologically rooted in anthropology, Cromwell (1999) drew on participant observation in the West Coast FTM community during the 1990’s. Cromwell critiqued the dominant medical discourses that pathologize transgender men and sought instead to illuminate the varied and diverse narratives represented within this community. His data revealed four levels of marginalization experienced by the trans men who were interviewed. The first involves the ways trans men are invisible as a result of being born into female bodies; thus they are typically regarded as women and not seen as men. The second area of invisibility results from the ways dominant medical narratives view trans men as pathological or defective women. The third level occurs as many female-bodied trans people successfully transition and then become invisible as trans people by living as men in the world. The fourth level of invisibility is faced by those men who when discovered to be trans are at risk of being viewed as “unreal” and thus viewed as really being women.

These narratives emphasized the critical role that “bodies” play in the lives of trans men. While psychiatric diagnoses speak of gender dysphoria, Cromwell’s (1999) participants did not necessarily identify with this term. Instead, they more accurately described a sort of “body-part dysphoria, which focused on elements such as breasts and menstruation that are quintessentially female” (p. 105). Related to this, Cromwell’s participants also described their “trans-ness” as a different sense of gendered identity rather than that of being simply male or female.

Rubin’s (2003) qualitative study of 22 transsexual men also revealed that embodiment was a crucial component of personal identity formation and perception. Prior to transition, these trans men were treated as women because their female anatomy was assumed to be a true
reflection of who they were. Realizing that they were more likely to be acknowledged as men if their bodies were recognizably male, most chose to alter their bodies to achieve this recognition.

In contrast to Cromwell (1999), Rubin (2003) found that most participants experienced a core sense of self that they experienced as “authentically male.” Their transition was the means of making these core male identities visible to the world around them. In this sense, bodies were “an expression of that core self” (p. 145). It is in this sense that Rubin’s data highlights a more essentialist narrative among trans men, meaning that what these men articulated was the sense that they had always been men; they had never been women; notions of how their bodies betrayed them during adolescence; or the ways they had never “transitioned;” they had just “evolved” and become their true selves.

Another significant finding in Rubin’s (2003) work involves his discussion of the tensions trans men experience between their “body image” (the way they imagine/internally experience their body/body parts) and the “material body” (the way their physical body is literally constructed) (see also Vidal-Ortiz, 2002). While others sometimes mistake trans men’s emphasis on bodily differences from lesbians as an indication of homophobia, Rubin (2003) found that this focus on bodily discomfort was neither misogynist nor homophobic. Rather, this insistence reflected their need to be viewed as “men,” separate and distinct from women or female-bodied persons (pp. 125-26).

Rubin (2003) further noted that many of the trans men in his study were significantly troubled by hegemonic masculinity and that this often became a barrier in achieving an untroubled identity as a man (p. 124). Rubin found a distinct preference among the men in his study for developing alternative versions of masculinities, concluding that trans men offer unique potential to redefine what it means to be a man.
In contrast to the ways most cisgender people take gender for granted, the narratives in Vidal-Ortiz (2002) qualitative study highlight how central the process of “doing gender” is for transgender men. Not surprisingly, their comments suggest that trans men recognize and grapple with gender constructs more intensely than do others in the general public. Study participants’ desire to be read consistently as a man is in fact what often motivates trans men to move away from the “psychic and social-cultural space” of women (Vidal-Ortiz, 2002, p. 181). Despite this, Vidal-Ortiz too found that most trans men did not want to engage with hegemonic notions of masculinity. In a reflection of Mead’s (1934) tenet that the self needs a society, study findings indicated the importance of a group of peers who acknowledge trans men as men.

Another critical aspect of this study is the way sex, gender, and sexuality were “linked processes in the lives of transgender men” (Vidal-Ortiz, 2002, p. 186). The interviews indicated that sexuality could not easily be separated from gender and that one of the chief affirmations of the men’s masculinity occurred in the context of their sexuality. Most of the men in this study reported a history of having always felt like a man and like Rubin’s (2003) data, some men experienced this need for sex/gender congruency very much in terms of their physical bodies (Vidal-Ortiz, 2002, p. 205).

Saltzburg (2010) conducted a qualitative study of 15 trans-masculine identified individuals exploring underlying themes used in constructing their gender identity. Results showed that transmasculine identity may be conceptualized on a continuum from an essentialist binary perspective to a constructivist non-binary perspective. The individuals interviewed defined, experienced, and embodied transmasculine identities differently depending on a number of inter-related constructs including: (1) current stage of identity development and past transmasculine identity development events, (2) conceptions of masculinity and femininity, (3)
specific social contexts, and (4) experiences of their sexuality. Many of these trans men viewed hegemonic narratives of masculinity as limiting, and even harmful, and described searching out alternatives models of masculinity for themselves. Participants experienced their gender identities in varying degrees of comfort and acceptance across different settings and contexts, such as general social interactions, the workplace, with significant others, and in men’s spaces.

In summary, the social invisibility of transgender people, and trans men in particular, coupled with the stigma associated with gender dysphoria has led to a paucity of relevant research data on this population. Much of the existing literature is focused on the transgender identity development process and how individuals navigate their gender transition. There are only a handful of studies about the lived experiences of transgender men as negotiated in varying social and relational contexts. Little research exists about the challenges and joys of transgender parents. There is no literature within the field of social work about the experiences of transgender social workers, other than my own (Nealy, 2011) narrative about my coming out experiences with clients. There are no autoethnographic studies by transgender men (and only one autoethnographic article by a trans woman; Dent, 2002). This dissertation seeks to fill a substantial gap in the existing literature by offering an in-depth and nuanced examination of my own life experiences as a transgender man, father, and social worker. By focusing on the meaning of masculinity in my life, my daily gendered practices, and my internal sense of myself as a man, I hope to illuminate more macro narratives about gender, masculinity, and sexuality.
Theoretical Literature

Given that ethnographic data is typically used to refine and reformulate the researcher’s original theoretical ideas, Buch and Staller (2007) suggest it is useful to begin the research process with an awareness of a variety of formal and informal theories that can help one understand what they encounter in the field. In this section, I review the theoretical foundations for my study, describing signposts or sensitizing concepts that guided my work. These areas include: gender theories, masculinities studies, queer theory, and Goffman’s work on stigma.

Early Ideas about Gender

Most of us have grown up with very strong Western cultural notions about gender identity and expression. These expectations tell us that there are only two types of normal (i.e., acceptable) human beings: heterosexual females with typical “feminine” characteristics, and heterosexual males with typical “masculine” characteristics (Hausman, 2001). As feminist scholar and theologian Virginia Mollenkott (2001) puts it, this binary gender construct assumes that the two-gendered system is the biologically and divinely decreed norm – the equivalent of “God’s Will” for humanity and creation. In this sense, gender is so pervasive in our society that it seems like it must be natural – like water to a fish, or the sun coming up (Lorber, 1994). Gender arrangements and distinctions are so familiar that we just assume they are an inherent and essential part of who we are as human beings.

As we moved into the modern age, religious beliefs about gender were often supplanted by scientific “truths” about the essential nature of men and women and their distinctive yet
complementary roles and functions in society. As Bem (1993) quips, biological essentialism and male supremacy moved from being “God’s grand creation” to “evolution’s grand creation” (p. 2). While notions of the social construction of gender began in the twentieth century in the work of Sigmund Freud, Talcott Parsons, and later sex role theorists, it was still heavily imbued with a sense of essentialism and inevitability.

When Freud was theorizing about childhood gender development, it was widely understood that men and women were fundamentally different. This was rooted partly in biological essentialism and the differences in male and female reproductive functions. It was also rooted in clear distinctions in gendered roles with women being primarily responsible for housekeeping and child-rearing and men serving as the breadwinners. It was also assumed that children needed both a mother and a father for normal, healthy gender development.

Freud’s central thesis was that children move through a series of sexual developmental stages whereby they are socialized into adulthood. As he posited, children are not born with social and cultural identities; instead these are formed through contact with significant others, especially parents. Critical in this process is the development of masculine and feminine traits during the Oedipal stage. Given the way this is resolved for boys, males are required to identify with, and become competitive with, their father (and thus other males), especially for the attention of women. Freud equated normal human development with male developmental patterns and viewed feminine development as a deviation from the “norm.” Critical to the development of healthy adult men was a denial of, and separation from, anything female/feminine (Whitehead, 2002).

Functionalism further reinforced the dominant quasi-essentialist theories about sex and gender. Following Freud, functionalism saw the family as a “factory” for the production of stable
heterosexual adult personalities (Whitehead, 2002). Roles of men and women were viewed as naturally different but complementary; the inequality of men and women was a “natural” phenomenon. Emerging role theorists believed that people were “compelled to perform culturally prescribed roles for the benefit of both society and themselves (Whitehead, 2002, p. 19). This early and ongoing process of socialization ensured “ideal” behaviors and perpetuated dominant beliefs and stereotypes regarding sex/gender and sexual orientation.

Most studies on gender during the 1960’s-70’s revolved around sex role theory. In this framework, sex role referred to a set of behaviors and characteristics widely viewed in White, middle and upper class American society as typical and desirable of men and women. (Pleck, 1981). In some ways a blending of essentialist and socialization theories, sex role theory posited that the fundamental task of individual psychological development was establishing an appropriate gender role identity generally based on our relationship with our same sex parent. This was conceptualized as an innate need; in essence, that men and women are internally programmed to learn a traditional sex role as part of normative psychological development and childhood socialization through the family, media, schools, and faith communities. The development of an appropriate sex role identity during childhood and adolescence was viewed as essential to healthy adult psychological adjustment (Pleck, 1981).

By the mid-1970’s sex role theory became heavily critiqued. Bem (1993) explored the content of sex roles through studies utilizing the Bem Sex Role Inventory (BSRI). This research posited that individuals could be described as falling into four gender role types: masculine, feminine, androgynous, and undifferentiated. In studies conducted with the BSRI, Bem found that the most “well-adjusted” people fell between the polar opposites of masculinity and femininity. It was those persons categorized as androgynous who were more flexible in their
approach to life tasks and thus more mentally healthy. The old gender paradigm held that 
humans have an innate psychological need for an “gender-appropriate” sex role identity. One of 
Bem’s chief contributions to the field of psychology at that time was her evidence that there was 
o no intrinsic relationship between sex role identity and healthy psychological adjustment (Pleck, 1981). This research also moved the understanding of gender from that of a single notion to one 
of a multiple spectrum.

**Early Men’s Studies**

Beginning in the late 1960’s, men and men’s culture began to be examined more 
critically, particular in relation to a culture of male violence. Scholars also began to examine the 
ways traditional gender roles were limiting and constraining not only for women and children, 
but also for men themselves. The first wave of men’s studies in the 1970’s drew attention to the 
problematic aspects of masculinity, in parallel to the first wave of feminism’s emphasis on 
gender inequality. Brannon (1976) summarized the traditional male sex role prescriptions 
through the use of four basic admonitions to men. These were: (1) *No Sissy Stuff*: Never do anything that even remotely suggests femininity. Masculinity is rooted in the repudiation of all things feminine (and this includes homosexuality); (2) *Be a Big Wheel*: Masculinity is measured by power, success, wealth, and status; (3) *Be a Sturdy Oak*: Being a real man depends on remaining calm and reliable in a crisis. Real men never show their emotions; remember, boys don’t cry; (4) *Give’em Hell*: Be sure to always exude an aura of manly daring, adventure, and aggression. Go for it. Take risks.
This first wave of men’s studies (sometimes called men’s liberation) noted that traditional notions of masculinity interfered with men’s personal and interpersonal happiness and harmony, citing: (a) men’s relative inability to experience intimacy, closeness, and emotional connectedness with their significant others; (b) men’s general inclination to resort to anger and violence when confronted with frustrating situations; (c) men’s consistent refraining from house and child care work; and (d) men’s tendency to consider sexuality and emotionality as two distinct entities to be pursued separately and independently (Philaretou & Allen, 2001).

Pleck and Sawyer (1974) described the ways men were caught between a more traditional version of the male sex role and a more modern interpretation. In the traditional male sex role, masculinity was validated by individual physical strength and aggression. Men were not expected to be emotionally sensitive to others or emotionally expressive or self-revealing. Men’s anger, especially toward other men, however was tolerated and even expected.

In the more modern male sex role, masculinity was validated by economic achievement and organizational/bureaucratic power. Interpersonal skills were useful when they contributed to these goals. Emotional sensitivity and self-expression were valued in romantic relationships with women, but only with women. The new man was expected to maintain emotional control at all time with even the expression of anger being discouraged (Pleck & Sawyer, 1974).

Earlier studies about men had framed men’s problems in terms of their difficulties fitting into the appropriate male sex role. Joseph Pleck (1981) in his work on gender role strain theory disavowed this position and challenged the form of sex role theory, positing that the problem was that the male sex role itself was inherently contradictory and inconsistent (Kimmel, 2008).

One critical result of Pleck’s work was the way it shifted the locus of the problems of men away from individual men and onto the male sex role itself as a source of strain, anxiety,
and male problems in living (Kimmel, 2008). Pleck and Sawyer (1974) viewed the male sex role as an impossible ideal, stating that the “masculine drive for success can never be fulfilled, even by those at the top. It is not enough to win once, we have to keep winning… [this] learned need to keep proving ourselves ensures many men remain vaguely dissatisfied with their lives” (pp. 3-4).

Pleck further posited that the persistence of sex role theories in the 1960-70’s was linked to the emerging visibility of transsexual women like Christine Jorgensen, Jan Morris, and Renee Richard. As he put it, to the general public the “specter of transsexuality revealed the dangers of nontraditional gender roles.” Consequently, many parents worried that publicizing these nontraditional roles might cause their children to become transsexuals (Pleck, 1981, p. 156).

**Analysis of Power and the Social Construction of Gender**

It was not until the second wave of feminism and men’s studies beginning in the mid-late 1980’s that a more coherent power analysis began to emerge challenging the social and cultural arrangements that privileged men and sustained men’s power. Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) challenged sex role theory for its failure to account for power differentials between men and women. Others note that it masked dynamics of power and material inequality (Carrigan, Connell & Lee, 2002). Kimmel (2008) insists that an adequate explanation of gender must account not only for gender differences but also for the pervasive persistence of men’s power. Kimmel (2008) further notes that the notion of “role” focuses on individuals and thus depoliticizes gender, making gender a set of individual attributes rather than a product of social structure. Both Kimmel (2008) and Connell (2009) critique sex role theory for its monolithic,
singular, and normative definition of masculinity and femininity, as opposed to the reality of many, multiple patterns of masculinities and femininities.

These critiques became possible largely through a movement away from essentialist ideology and into more social constructionist views of men and women. Connell (2009) goes on to highlight the way sex role theory portrays the learner as passive. In contrast, from a social constructionist lens, we are active participants in constructing our gendered identities. Similarly, sex role theories are too narrow and miss much of the pleasure in gendered learning, the resistance posed to normative definitions of masculinities and femininities, and the considerable difficulties in constructing these identities (Connell, 2009).

In her classic text, *Lenses of Gender*, Bem (1993) suggests we are socialized to view the world through three gender lenses – androcentrism, polarization, and biological essentialism. While invisible, these lenses are nonetheless pervasively embedded in our cultural discourses, our social institutions, and our individual psyches. From her perspective, it is these lenses that systematically reproduce male dominance generation after generation.

In contrast to the way these lenses make our societal gender arrangements and inequalities seem natural, some feminist scholars argue that gender is socially constructed. As Connell (2009) states, being a man or a woman is not a predetermined state; it is a *becoming*, a condition actively under construction. Connell (2009) goes on to note that womanhood and manhood are not fixed by nature, nor are they simply imposed from the outside; instead people construct themselves as masculine or feminine. We “claim a place in the gender order – or respond to the place we have been given – by the way we conduct ourselves in everyday life” (p. 6). Similarly, Lorber (1994) notes that gender, like culture, is a human production that depends on all of us constantly “doing gender” (citing West & Zimmerman, 1987).
Earlier essentialist notions as well as sex role theory posited distinct and unequal roles for men and women in American culture; they posited gender itself as two opposite extremes. These ideas powerfully affect how we view ourselves and those around us but they are not the only paradigm for gender. In the journal of *Social Work*, Burdge (2007) calls on social workers to relinquish binary models and instead, view gender as a more fluid construct. In this vein, more contemporary theorists have moved toward a belief that gender is a human production, that it is not essential to who we are, but instead is socially constructed in the context of our social and interpersonal environment.

The social construction of gender can be defined as the “social processes and normative expectations associated with being a man or a woman and how these processes and expectations are reproduced in society” (Siltanen & Doucet, 2008). This dissertation employs this more contemporary feminist lens. It views our experience of our gender as socially constructed, though at times this experience may be so subconscious that it can appear or feel almost essential.

In addition to gender being socially constructed, it is essential to understand gender as an unjust power construct. Gender is the way society is organized to privilege men and disadvantage women. As Connell (2009) notes, it is not just the boundaries between men and women that are a problem; it is the inequalities as well. These inequities are evident in the ways that even today religion, corporate wealth, science, and technology are all still largely run by men. Women’s bodies are often viewed as “objects of consumption” and women are treated with unequal respect; they are marginal to the main action of the world like cheerleaders at a football game (Connell, 2009, p. 7).
Sandra Harding (1989) holds that gender oppression is structured along three main dimensions: institutional, symbolic, and the individual. In this sense, gender is not just about difference; it is simultaneously about power and inequality. It is not necessarily true that every man holds power over women. While all men benefit from our gender order, they do not necessarily benefit equally; race, class, sexuality, disability all influence the degree of power men wield (Connell, 2009). Yet, gender is about the power that men as a group have over women as a group. In fact, Kimmel (2008) posits that power is not the consequence of gender differences; power is what produces these differences in the first place. In this sense, gender is inherently political (Connell, 2009).

These later, more contemporary constructivist beliefs about gender relations were foreshadowed by much of Erving Goffman’s work. Beginning with *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959) through his later work in *Gender Advertisements* (1979) and *The arrangement between the sexes* (1977), Goffman viewed gender as thoroughly socially constructed. From his perspective, many of the dynamics touted as essential differences between the sexes were actually the means through which those very differences were produced and maintained. His thinking presaged even much of Judith Butler’s work on the performance of gender when he wrote:

What the human nature of males and females really consists of… is a capacity to learn to provide and to read depictions of masculinity and femininity and a willingness to adhere to a schedule for presenting these pictures, and this capacity they have by virtue of being persons, not females or males (Goffman, 1976, p. 8).

In the years that followed, others built on Goffman’s interactionist approach to gender studies, including Garfinkel’s (1967) *Studies in Ethnomethodology*, with his chapter on passing and the managed achievement of sex status in an male-to-female transsexual; Kessler and
McKenna’s (1978) ethnomethodological study on gender from the starting point of transsexual experience, and West and Zimmerman’s (1987) classic article, Doing Gender.

During this same time period, numerous feminist scholars began addressing transsexualism, generally engaging it as a “concept” in terms of what it might mean for their understanding of the category “gender” (Johnson, 2005). Many feminist perspectives were quite negative. Jeffreys’ (2003) suggested sex reassignment surgery as a technique to eradicate homosexuality; Greer (1999) claimed that transsexual women could never be “real” women because they can never feel/experience what it truly means to be a woman and Raymond (1979) insisted that transsexual women were really men attempting to infiltrate woman’s spaces. Others viewed transsexuals (both men and women) as threatening to lesbian identity and communities (Johnson, 2012). These feminist tracts rarely sought to conceptualize gender from the standpoint of the transsexual. Rather as Connell (2012) notes, even more recent feminist work, with its emphasis on poststructural theory, can be demeaning to transgender people and their lives (p. 863).

Still, as transgender men and women began to develop their own body of work, many of them strongly incorporated feminist ideas. Supporting the need for greater openness in feminist gender studies, Johnson (2012) concludes that feminist work will be “strengthened and our own ideological values challenged by a deeper engagement with the specificities of trans experience and the multiple and competing ways these simultaneously support and undermine the binary gender system” (p. 614).
The Social Construction of Masculinities

As constructivism and feminist deconstructions began to reshape our understanding of sex/gender, researchers became more interested in the study of men and masculinity. Key questions included: What is masculinity? How do we measure it? Do some men have more of it than others? How does it relate to class, race, and sexuality? Are men born with it? Can one lose it? Is it constant? (Whitehead, 2002, pp. 4-5)

From a historical perspective, notions of masculinity have shifted over time as well as varied across different social contexts. From a feminist perspective, masculinity does not exist as a biological reality; instead it is socially constructed, fluid, and understood in varying ways across time and culture. Rather than a singular notion of masculinity, masculinities are always plural and vary widely across race/ethnicity, class, sexuality, age, and ability.

Connell (2011) defines masculinities as “socially constructed patterns of gender practice” (p. 3). As the second wave of men’s studies emerged in the late 1980’s-1990’s, the notion of “hegemonic masculinity” became a critical concept in the study of masculinities. At any given time in place and history, hegemonic masculinity is that form of masculinity esteemed to be the most valued way of being a man in society (Connell, 1987, 1995; Carrigan, Connell, & Lee, 2002). As such, it legitimates the subordination of women and requires other men to position themselves in relationship to it (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). While only a minority of men in the culture may actually meet its demands, it is considered normative and larger numbers of men remain complicit in sustaining it, even if they cannot attain the standards of hegemonic masculinity (Carrigan, Connell, & Lee, 2002; Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005).
Central to the workings of hegemonic masculinity is the position of dominance over women, as well as the subordination of varying forms of masculinity and other men. In this paradigm, manhood is equated with power. Connell’s classic definition of hegemonic masculinity is a “man in power, a man with power, and a man of power” (as cited in Kimmel, 2003). Kimmel (2003) suggests, “The very definitions of manhood in our culture maintain the power some men have over other men and that men have over women” (p. 57). He goes on to note, “We come to know what it means to be a man in our culture by setting our definitions in opposition to a set of “others” – racial minorities, sexual minorities, and above all, women” (p. 52). Indeed, a primary rule of hegemonic masculinity in the United States is that a man not “be, act, or behave in ways attributed to women” (Anderson, 2009, p. 34). Related to this rule is the insistence that the normative model of masculinity is always heterosexual (Carrigan, Connell, & Lee, 2002).

Given this, Herek (1986) suggests that “to be a ‘man’ in contemporary American society is to be homophobic – that is, to be hostile toward homosexual persons in general and gay men in particular” (p. 563). This hostility is rooted in fear - fear that other men will challenge one’s masculinity and prove to the world that we are not “real” men. It is the fear of being humiliated in front of other men. This fear drives American men to maintain a hyper-masculine front in everything they do – what they wear, how they talk, how they walk, what they eat. As Kimmel (2003) notes, “every mannerism, every movement, contains a coded gender language” (p. 65). It is in this sense that homophobia, sexism, heterosexism, and hegemonic masculinity are intertwined.

Kimmel (2003) posits that it is this fear of being seen as unmanly that propels American men to deny manhood to other men. In an effort to shore up its own masculine image, manhood
in America has been the province of Goffman’s classic man – predominantly white, straight, middle – upper class able-bodied men – and its very definition was constructed to prevent others from achieving it, lest they topple the “real” men at the top of the hierarchy. Throughout American history, these “other” men were variously identified as racial/ethnic minority men, disabled men, immigrant men, and homosexual men.

Whitehead (2002) concludes that in contemporary men’s studies it is no longer viable to speak about masculinity in the singular. Both the movement away from essentialist views and the forces of globalization necessitate definitions of masculinity that are multiple, varied, and diverse. Kimmel and Messner (2001) emphasize the ways masculinity is constructed differently along the lines and sub-lines of race, class, and age. For example, black masculinity differs from white masculinity, yet each is further modified by class and age (Kimmel & Messner, 2001, p. xvi).

Despite this fluidity, there is a “material actuality” to these masculinities that is “frequently underpinned by violence and its threat” (Whitehead, 2002, p. 35). While masculinities may vary and in that sense be “illusory,” the reality of men’s oppressive and violent practices and society’s belief in the supremacy of men “has very real material and physical consequences” (Ibid, p. 39). At the same time, the reality of multiple and sometimes contradictory masculinities offers hope that the hegemonic version currently in place within our culture can change over time. Writing in the 1970’s about class struggle, Williams (1977) concludes:

A lived hegemony is always a process… [hegemony] does not just passively exist as a form of dominance. It has continually to be renewed, recreated, defended, and modified. It is also continually resisted, limited, altered, and challenged by pressures not at all its own… The reality of any hegemony, in the extended political and cultural sense, is that, while by definition it is always dominant, it is never either total or exclusive (pp. 112-113).
Queer Theory

Heavily critiquing identity and identity politics, queer theory both challenges the binary gender construct and posits all identities as being fluid and constantly in flux. From a queer lens, even the notion of a gender “spectrum” is inadequate, because inevitably and implicitly, even a gender spectrum is “anchored by the only two real genders – Man and Woman” (Wilchins, 2004, p. 41).

Queer theory emerges from social constructionism in its emphasis on lived experience, on identity as always situated in a specific context of time and place (Gamson, 2000). In this sense, our self cannot be known in a vacuum; it is always known and experienced relationally. Foucault’s work on the “deconstruction of the self” is essential to queer theory. Traditional Western notions of “finding our self, knowing our self, and being true to our self” assume that “the self” exists as an objective reality that can be apprehended (Wilchins, 2004). Foucault posited that the self is always subjective and emerges in response to particular cultural and historical needs and demands.

Queer theory implies political commitment. It deconstructs what passes as “normal” and focuses instead on how bodies/selves both “constitute and are constituted by systems of power as well as how bodies might serve as sites of social change” (Holman Jones & Adams, 2010, p. 209). It dismantles hegemonic categories such as heterosexuality and gender normativity, cuts across “mandatory gender divisions,” and reclams the marginal discourses of those left outside binary constructs (Warner, 1994, xxvi). From this perspective, Seidman (1996) suggests that a queer theoretical research imperative shifts the focus from the study of LGBT people and their
lives to a study of the systems and practices of heteronormativity and gender conformity promotion.

Judith Butler’s work is pivotal to queer theory. For Butler, there is no ontological truth to being male or female; indeed there is no “real” male or female body, only an unattainable ideal to which to aspire (Butler, 1990, 1993a; Johnson, 2012). Using an analysis of drag, Butler (1990) posits that every aspect of gender is performatively produced through a “stylized repetition of acts” (p. 141). Drag reveals “the imitative structure of gender itself” (Butler, 1990, p. 37). As Wilchins (2004) puts it, gender turns out to be the copy for which there is no original; “woman” is to drag not as real is to copy, but instead as copy is to copy; all gender is drag/performative (p. 134; see also originally Butler, 1993b, p. 313). Gender is the social, economic, cultural process by which sex – both male and female, and only male and female – appear real (Brady & Schirato, 2011).

Butler’s work opened the door to a more positive relationship between feminism and transgender people (Connell, 2012) and facilitated the emergence of transgender theory. Following Butler’s line of thought, trans men and trans women can be viewed as engaged in much the same task of attaining a “sex” as non-transgender people are; in essence, that we are all striving for the effect of “realness” in the ongoing process of becoming male or female, although as Johnson (2005) notes, transsexual persons must put more work into unbecoming the sex they wish to reject (p. 36).

For Butler, gender is not something we have or are; instead gender is about doing. And she insists, it is something we are compelled to do in order to be recognized as “human.” Bodies only make sense (and only count as bodies that matter) when sex, gender and desire cohere within a framework structured by heterosexuality (Butler, 1990). Later in *Undoing Gender,*
Butler (2004) extensively discusses the ways trans bodies are excluded from the category of the “human” to which we all aspire (Halberstam, 2012).

As Butler (2004) understands it, part of the task of both feminism and queer theory is to determine “how to create a world in which those who understand their gender and their desire to be non-normative can live and thrive not only without the threat of violence from the outside but without the pervasive sense of their own unreality, which can lead to suicide or suicidal life” (p. 219).

**Goffman and Stigma**

Similarly, the *Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* deals extensively with feelings of embarrassment, shame, and/or humiliation. Schudson (2000) notes that Goffman’s sociology is built upon the premise that “embarrassment is of fundamental social and moral significance” (p. 3). Goffman (1959) states that embarrassment typically occurs when events arise that discredit or throw doubt on the performance of the actor and/or the definition of the immediate social situation as perceived by both the actor and the audience.

At such moments the individual whose presentation has been discredited may feel ashamed while the others present may feel hostile, and all the participants may come to feel ill at ease, non-plussed, out of countenance, embarrassed, experiencing the kind of anomy that is generated when the minute social system of face-to-face interaction breaks down (Goffman, 1959, p. 12).

Consequently, the performer/selves in Goffman’s dramaturgical model actively attempt to anticipate and prevent and/or manage these feeling states as they occur in the interaction order.

It was in this context that Goffman (1963) wrote another pivotal text, *Stigma: Notes on the Management of a Spoiled Identity*. Goffman defines stigma as an “attribute that is deeply
“discrediting” and reduces the bearer “from a whole and usual person to a tainted, discounted one (p. 3).” From Goffman’s perspective, stigma is not inherent to the individual. Instead, it is a societal reaction that “spoils” normal identity and a dynamic generated in the context of social interaction.

Goffman (1963) observed that the stigmatized person approaches most social interactions with anxiety because they perceive, often correctly, that “whatever others profess, they do not really accept him, and are not ready to make contact with him on equal grounds (p. 7). Meyer’s (2007) research about lesbian, gay, and bisexual persons would suggest that transgender persons learn to anticipate negative responses from members of the dominant gender-normative culture and consequently maintain a heightened sense of vigilance that is continually evoked in a transgender person’s day-to-day social interactions. From repeated decisions about which restrooms to use, to what for others are quotidian conversations with shopkeepers and clerks, transgender people are on high alert for reactions and/or disclosures that might potentially discredit their gender performance.

To offset anticipated discrimination and harassment transgender people employ various disclosure and concealment strategies. These strategies include “passing” in order to be seen as cisgender, “covering” or censoring clues about oneself so one’s trans identity remains hidden, or “being out,” which involves telling others about one’s transgender experience/history. Concealment strategies can be a significant source of stress and sometimes inhibit forming connections with other transgender people which could moderate minority stressors. It is important to note that disclosure and concealment strategies differ for lesbian, gay, and bisexual and transgender persons in that lesbian, gay, and bisexual people frequently have the ability to “pass” for heterosexual. However, trans persons, and especially trans women, often do not have
the privilege to pass as their gender identity is written on their physical body selves. [What I mean by this is that many trans men begin hormone therapy and very shortly pass consistently as men. However, for trans women taking estrogen does not erase the effects of testosterone. Consequently, they may find themselves living as women yet sometimes still being “read” as trans.]

In this sense, Goffman offers a unique vantage point in exploring transgender experience. A frequent theme in my clinical work with transgender men is their fear of being “discredited”: essentially the fear that if someone discovers their transgender history, they will no longer be viewed as a “real” or “normal” man. Transgender men tend to view this as a fear unique to their trans experience. While there are particular (and often painful) ways that transgender men are discredited, and thus devalued and de-humanized, what Goffman simultaneously suggests is that the embarrassment of being discredited is also a universal human possibility.

This dissertation pulls from all these theoretical perspectives – gender studies, work on masculinities, queer theory, and Goffman’s work on social stigma. As an autoethnographic study, I seek to interrogate the narrative of my own journey as a transgender man, father, and social worker in conversation with these theoretical foundations. Through the lens of these theoretical approaches and the methodology of autoethnography, the connections between the personal and the cultural/political are explored.

Theoretical Framework: Symbolic Interactionism

This dissertation is theoretically framed by a type of social constructionism known as symbolic interactionism. Emerging out of the Chicago school of sociology in the early 1900’s,
symbolic interaction is a theoretical framework that posits the self primarily as a social construction. It holds that humans are social beings and that who we are is a product of our social interactions with others. In this sense, who we are as persons is not fixed or static; rather who we are is continually shifting and evolving over the course of our lifetime.

The focus of symbolic interactionism is on micro-level interactions and how they construct/reflect/shape/empower/constrain our sense of self/identity. It draws on Mead’s (1934) notion of the “self,” a self that is created and continually recreated only in reaction to the social “other.” For Mead, there was no essential, inner unchanging “I” or self; instead, the self was constantly in process given its ongoing reflexivity in the social world (Hird, 2002). Similarly it draws on Cooley’s (1902) notion of the “looking glass self,” another metaphor for a self, formed and ever-evolving in the context of our daily social interactions. For both Mead and Cooley, the notion of our self is always a “self in process, constantly constructed and reconstructed in interaction with others” (Jackson, 2007, p. 4).

Moving out from Mead and Cooley, the very title of this dissertation situates my study in the later theoretical work of Erving Goffman (1922-1982), one of the major sociologists of the twentieth century. While rarely citing Mead or Cooley, Goffman’s work explored many of their major themes such as the self, the primacy of social interaction, the dynamics and rules of the social order in which we live, and the realities of social inequality.

Goffman’s thinking was groundbreaking in its time and laid the foundation for much of what has evolved more recently in fields of feminist, body-centric, and queer theory. Goffman broke new ground in the social sciences by elevating the everyday interactions between persons as a legitimate focus of sociological study. His unit of analysis was the social situation. In examining what he called “the interaction order,” Goffman’s overriding concern was to make the
self a visible, *sociological* phenomenon, thus effectively shifting the study of self out of the
purview of the discipline of psychology alone (Smith, 2006). In reflecting on the impact of his
work, Hancock and Garner (2009) describe Goffman as an “empirically focused micro-
sociologist in practice, whose work had macro-sociological consequences for theories of society”
(p. 104).

His now classic text, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959), was derived from
his dissertation studies and explored the quotidian aspects of social life using the metaphor of the
theater. Called the dramaturgical model, from this vantage point the world or society is a real-
time theatrical performance in which each of us is a performer. We are constantly performing our
Self complete with roles, masks, and scripts. The central goal is that the performance of our Self
be credible. This necessitates a continually evolving social self as the audience varies in response
to each performance.

Goffman posited that there are different kinds of stages – a “front stage” with the main
audience/public and a “back stage” area where we relax and drop our roles and masks. However,
he was quick to point out that even when back stage we are still performing to varying degrees,
albeit with a different kind of audience. Our performance involves both the impressions we
intend to convey and those inadvertently conveyed through body language and facial expression.
Those roles/Selves vary because the performance is always an interaction between the
performer/Self and that particular audience. Consequently, our Self is continually co-constructed
in the context of social interaction.

Goffman rejected the predominant psychoanalytic perspective of his time that asserted
human beings had a core self which could be uncovered or revealed through therapeutic analysis.
His was a critical movement away from essentialism. Furthermore, his work was not a study of
what might be termed the differences between a public (and thus, false) self and a more private/true/real self. For Goffman, acting was an “existential metaphor” that illuminates the ways each of us, as selves/performers is constantly managing how others see/experience us (Tseêlon, 2000). The dramaturgical metaphor highlights the premise that we must continually negotiate our identity across varying relational contexts. For Goffman, personal identities are not concrete/essential things “to be possessed and displayed;” instead, they are “something that must be enacted and portrayed, something that must be realized” (Goffman, 1959, p. 75).

Hird (2002) suggests that symbolic interactionism challenges authenticity arguments because it does not view identity as a stable and coherent object. In this sense, it is again possible Goffman offers something unique to transgender studies. From his standpoint, we might explore the transgender man’s struggle to be seen as a “real” man in the context of a larger human struggle. We might ask whether the trans man’s sense of his own reality is something that is tangible and essential. Or, is it something that must be continually enacted and portrayed, thus something to be only realized from moment to moment in an ongoing way?

Coltrane (1994) notes that an emphasis on social structure has been dropped by much of the postmodern turn toward discourse analysis. However, he argues that a focus on “systemic patterns of social relations and the dialectical nature of social processes has much to offer the contemporary scholar” (p. 40). Jackson (2007) cautions that an interactionist approach can sometimes be inattentive to larger structural constraints. However, when coupled with materialist feminism, a symbolic interactionist framework can highlight the importance of social structure at both the macro- and micro-levels.

This dissertation theoretically framed by social interactionism documents the presentation of one transgender man in the material realities of everyday social life against the backdrop of the
larger structural realities of gender inequality and heteronormativity that constrain these
interactions. From an interactionist approach, all roles (including gender roles) are not fixed but
instead continually negotiated between individuals in particular historical and social contexts.
Given this, my study begins with the detailed micro-analysis of the ordinary, daily interactions of
my gendered life (my autoethnographic narrative; the data). Interrogating this narrative alongside
relevant theoretical literature, I moved to the larger issues of how my transgender self is
successfully or unsuccessfully constructed and negotiated in varying times and contexts (the data
analysis).
Chapter 3: Methodology

Against the backdrop of gender and masculinities studies and in dialogue with queer and transgender theory, I begin with my own experience of gender transition, with my own deeply felt questions about what it means to be a [real] man in our society, with my own efforts to navigate my masculinity as a man, a father, a social worker, and a professor. I began that transition in the midst of a doctoral program, studying the social structures, policies, and institutions that both constrain and empower our lives.

Time and time again, in my own journey and in the lives of my trans male clients, I have grappled with what it means to be a man, and a trans man, in our society. In this vein, Moustakas (1990) states, “All heuristic inquiry begins with the internal search to discover, with an encompassing puzzlement, a passionate desire to know, a devotion and commitment to pursue a question that is strongly connected to one’s own identity and selfhood” (p. 40). These are the questions that drive my research project and bring me to the choice of methodology.

In this section, the methodology of autoethnography is outlined. This includes situating the method in the rich history of qualitative research, key concepts and relevant exemplars, the general and specific steps for conducting autoethnographic research, and the particular ways this method is highly suited for exploring the critical questions of this study. Critiques of this method, potential risks, and evaluative criteria will also be discussed.

Foundations of the Method

Denzin and Lincoln (2000) define qualitative research as “a situated activity that locates the observer in the world. It consists of a set of interpretive, material practices that make the
world visible ... qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or to interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them” (p. 3). From this perspective, notions of reality are social constructed and all scientific inquiry is recognized as value-laden. There is an intimate relationship between the researcher and the phenomenon being studied. Qualitative research strives to explicate how social experience is created and given meaning. Given this, it is uniquely designed to highlight issues of process, content, and detail.

Qualitative research combines social constructionist and poststructuralist theoretical paradigms. From this perspective, human beings “do not have direct access to a singular, stable, and fully knowable external reality. All of our understandings are contextually embedded, interpersonally forged, and necessarily limited” (Neimeyer, 1993, pp. 1-2). Guba and Lincoln (1989) note that the constructivist orientation is most appropriate when “phenomena can only be understood within the context in which they are studied” (pp. 44-45). Piercy and Benson (2005) point out the richness that comes with a constructionist view, noting that “the irony, comedy, tragedy, drama, ambiguity, and tension of real life can be flattened in the typical conventions of social science reporting, where statistics wipe away the nuances of emotional and behavioral complexities” (p. 157). Given my beginning premise that gender is a social construction, and consequently must be studied within its lived context, this dissertation utilized a qualitative approach.

Autoethnography as Method

The term autoethnography is typically credited to David Hayano (1979) who described anthropological studies in which the researcher was a “full insider/member,” and studied his/her own people and their culturally unique context. Various terms have been used to describe
autoethnography, including personal narratives, evocative narratives, narratives of the self, creative analytic ethnography, ethnic autobiography, and narrative ethnography. Autoethnographers vary in their emphasis on analysis, culture, and self. Their personal experience is highlighted because the experience when systematically analyzed offers a unique window into the culture being studied. The goal is to understand a self or some aspect of a life lived in a particular cultural context (Ellis & Bochner, 2000).

This methodology emerged during the “crisis of representation” in the 1980’s (Denzin, 1997). During this time period, many researchers were troubled by traditional positivist approaches that posited a master universal narrative and a knowable, fixed, and apprehendable reality. They held that the “facts” of traditional science were heavily interwoven with a researcher’s beliefs and paradigms. These researchers began to instead recognize “reality” as a collection of complex narratives told by many different peoples in an effort to make sense of and give meaning to their lives/world.

It was in this vein that more radical researchers began to create autoethnographic studies in an effort to “produce meaningful, accessible, and evocative research grounded in personal experience, research that would sensitize readers to issues of identity politics, to experiences shrouded in silence, and to forms of representation that would deepen our capacity to empathize with people who are different” (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011, p.1).

**Researcher as Subject**

In autoethnography the researcher is the subject and uses personal life experiences to explicate the culture of which he is a part (Pelias et al, 2008). As in feminist standpoint
epistemology, autoethnography privileges the importance of experience in the development of knowledge. In this sense the method focuses on “first-person details of a culture, details that help us understand and critique the social structures and processes constituting that culture” (Neumann, 1996, p. 162). It focuses on expanding and contextualizing meanings, rather than simplifying and reducing them as would be true in positivist traditions (Gallardo, Furman, & Kulkarni, 2009).

With the researcher as subject, autoethnography deconstructs the traditional dualisms of researcher/subject, outside/insider. In traditional research paradigms, objectivity (meaning detachment) is the highest value. Connell (2011) counters that “objectivity, as the attitude that leads to accurate, adequate knowledge of people and things, actually requires engagement with people and things” (p. 6). Reed-Danahay (1997) posits autoethography as the ultimate “post-modern ethnography” in which observer positions are called into question and goes on to call the autoethnographer a “boundary-crosser,” with the dual identity of both insider and outsider.

The use of the first-person narrative narrows the distance between researcher and reader. By inviting the reader to reflect on their own experiences alongside those of the author, the reader becomes a co-participant in the story rather than a simply passive recipient (Ellis & Bochner, 2000). With autoethnography, I do not simply describe what happened in the past tense as a remote observer. Instead, by writing the vignettes with dialogue, scene, and characters, I am in the moment inviting my readers to enter with me into the very center of the action/interaction/experience. When I “show”, rather than tell about, coming out to my five year old daughter, I hope my readers are more able to be with me in the moment.
**Strengths of Autoethnography**

Ruiz-Junco and Vidal-Ortiz (2011) describe autoethnography as a way of doing research using the personal to investigate the social. Indeed one of the strengths of this methodology is the way it is able to illuminate the complex structures and processes of social and cultural phenomena (Adams, 2012). Through its detailed presentation of day-to-day interactions and events, it enables the researcher and the reader to explore often taken-for-granted assumptions about everyday life, behavior, and decision-making (Muncey, 2010). In reflecting on the power of focusing on everyday experiences Moi writes:

> It is in looking at individuals within everyday, mundane circumstances that we come to find moments of socialization, internal colonization, overt oppression, privilege, resistance, and other social and interpersonal forces at work (Owen, 2008, p. 35, citing Moi, 1995)

For this project, I look through the unique lens of having lived my life as both a woman and a man, as visibly queer and typically assumed-to-be straight. The unique nature of my personal and professional circles allows me to have ongoing intimate dialogue with transgender men, cisgender gay men, and cisgender straight men. Allowing my reader access to these conversations bears witness to the performative assumptions often made about gender, sexuality, and masculinity.

A second strength of autoethnography is the way it renders complex theoretical notions more accessible (Adams, 2012). Discussions of gender theory or queer theory can be dense and highly academic, and sometimes experienced as disconnected from the lived experiences of people’s lives. Autoethnography uses creative writing to develop more aesthetic texts. Coupled with dialogue, plot, and characters, this creates engaging narratives that immerse readers in the
details of everyday life in a way that can illuminate more complex notions about the world and how it works.

Adams (2012) offers a third strength of autoethnographic research in the way it generates “insider knowledge.” The use of personal narrative as the research data enables one to gather more nuanced details about everyday social interactions that might ordinarily be missed in other methodologies. For example, a transgender man’s experiences of coming out and navigating his life are not events that can typically be observed directly. Even if we staged his coming out to occur in my presence, my presence would inevitably alter the experience for both the trans man and his associate. What autoethnography offers is the opportunity for the researcher to be present in that moment of coming out and record all of its minute details.

Autoethnographers are not only a participant in the social context in which their experiences occur; they are also observers of this story and its social location (Muncey, 2010). While the experiences I will describe are uniquely my experiences, they are also framed by my academic tools and training and viewed through more than ten years of listening to trans men’s narratives in my clinical practice. Again, this insider’s perspective makes autoethnography ideal for exploring the complex and often intangible emotional dynamics present in many life situations and encounters. More traditional research methods typically lack the ability to “get inside” a participant’s heart and mind in such a direct way. These rich, detailed, and complex narratives (Geertz, 1973, p.10, “thick descriptions”) from the perspective of the one living in the midst of these experiences, make autoethnography “ideally suited for investigating hidden or sensitive topics, such as those dealing with sexuality or life course transitions about which little is known” (Allen & Piercy, 2005, pp. 158-59).
Along these lines, in writing about her childhood experiences as an African American girl in small-town Kentucky, bell hooks says, “Living as we did – on the edge – we developed a particular way of seeing reality. We looked both from the outside in and from the inside out… we understood both” (hooks, 1984, p. vii; as cited in P. H. Collins, 2008, p. 308). Collins calls these marginal voices the “outsider within,” highlighting the way many African American women held a certain “insider” status by virtue of working in white peoples’ homes, yet still remained “outsiders” in terms of racial identity. Collins (2008) notes that, “their difference sensitizes them to patterns that may be more difficult for established sociological insiders to see” (p. 317).

The way in which autoethnography brings marginalized voices to the forefront is another strength of this method (Ruiz-Junco & Vidal-Ortiz, 2011). As an illustration of this Ruiz-Junco and Vidal-Ortiz (2011) describe the autoethnographic nature of work by Gloria Anzaldúa (2012) and Cherrie Moraga (1983; with Anzaldúa, 1983). Identifying them as “texts written from the margins,” both authors draw on their personal life experiences to illuminate the complex dynamics and social structures of race, ethnicity, and culture. Their work brought forth voices and stories that had previously been absent in academia. Similarly, the voices and lives of transgender men have largely been missing in both academia and broader public conversations.

Finally and unabashedly, autoethnography is research with a social change agenda. By producing more engaging and accessible texts, these narratives hold the potential to reach wider, more diverse audiences than does traditional research. It is in this sense that autoethnography can be a catalyst for personal and social change both within the academe and beyond it in the world in which we live (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011).
Conducting an Autoethnographic Study

Traditional research often separates the data collection – or discovery process – from the end phase of “writing up,” or reporting findings. In contrast, autoethnographers focus on “writing as a way of knowing” (Richardson, 200). The writing itself - both the story-telling narrative and the analysis of that story alongside theoretical literature - is the research practice that enables us to explore how we construct ourselves and the world around us. Recognizing writing as a method of inquiry transforms the writing process itself into a method of discovery and analysis (Richardson, 2000).

In this study I have written retrospectively about those personal experiences that emerge from my membership in transgender men’s culture. I have crafted narratives about the day-to-day social interactions I encountered as I navigated my identity as a man, a trans man, a partner, father, social worker, and professor. Having completed that task, I stepped back from these experiences in an effort to discern patterns such as repeated themes, feelings, and interactions. Instead of simply describing what happened in my life, I worked to explain how these memories came together to explain cultural tenets and my relationship with others in society (Chang, 2008). In the end, I hope to make my particular experience of transgender men’s culture “familiar for insiders and outsiders, and translate these personal experiences into meaningful cultural experience” (Adams, 2011, p. 159).

Bochner (2007) emphasizes that autoethnographic narratives are about story-telling, noting that all memory involves the ways in which we choose to re-count or retell the past. In this sense, memory itself is inquiry, because “all stories about the past are made, not found”
They are socially constructed, and in doing so we continue to construct and re-construct our identities in our everyday relationships with those around us.

The autoethnographer also often writes about “epiphanies”, or remembered moments, believed to have “significantly impacted the trajectory of a person’s life, times of existential crises that forced a person to attend to and analyze lived experience, and events after which life does not quite seem the same” (Ellis, Adams & Bochner, 2011, p. 2). In this sense, the autoethnographer works to “extract meaning from experience” rather than simply telling the details of the experience as it occurred (Bochner, 2000).

Data Collection

Data collection for this study consisted of composing autoethnographic accounts of my experiences as a transgender man navigating my day-to-day life as a husband, father, social worker, and professor. The stories are told in the first person in an effort to recount my lived experiences in as rich, complex, and detailed way as possible. It included the use of dialogue to recreate various social interactions I had with friends, family, colleagues, and strangers. This use of dialogue and the recreation of specific scenes enables the reader to make a personal emotional connection with my story, to enter into my experience in a way that is intended to decrease the experience of me, the transgender man, as “other.”

These narratives are embedded in the social context of my life and thus explored the various factors that came together and facilitated and/or complicated my gender transition. My age, race, ethnicity, economic class, geographic location, and family background are all factors that contextualize my story in a particular moment in time and place.
Chang (2008) notes several types of data used in autoethnographies, including personal memory data, self-observational and self-reflective data, and textual artifacts. The data in my study included numerous anecdotes/experiences that have occurred since I began my gender transition, some recorded at the time in journals and others recorded after fact using the processes of emotional recall. This involved writing about my experiences trying to capture as much as possible the emotions I had experienced during and after the event. Many of these vignettes represent pivotal moments and/or “epiphanies,” that illuminated my awareness of my identity as a man, father, social worker, and professor. They were moments in which I was suddenly able to see gender and sexuality differently than it had appeared prior to transition. These stories re-create day-to-day social interactions involving my gendered performance and the response of those around me. Other data included emails and correspondence with significant others, colleagues, and friends.

I created many more vignettes than I was able to draw upon in this study and there are others that could have been written but were not. The sampling of vignettes chosen for this study, like the data samples chosen in many qualitative approaches, was done in a more heuristic manner. It was not so much the representativeness of the vignettes as whether those chosen had the ability to illustrate the phenomenon being explored in this study. I also worked to ensure the analysis and interpretation of the vignettes was reliably and critically carried out.

**Data Analysis**

The data analysis began immediately as part of the data collection in the sense that as I am wrote I was asking questions about my experiences. It utilized the format of “layered accounts” (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011) in which I explored personal experiences alongside
data, theoretical material, and other relevant literature. I drew on four components from the process of feminist ethnography. These are (a) coding, (b) identifying patterns and thematic analysis, (c) comparing and contrasting actors and situations, and (d) contextualizing incidents and experiences by connecting the ways social life is related to larger social and political trends at the time (Buch & Staller, 2007).

Other strategies I utilized included looking for cultural themes; (b) identifying exceptional occurrences; connecting the present with the past; analyzing relationships between self and others; and comparing with social science constructs and theories (Chang, 2008).

In this light as I reviewed my text, I sought out emergent themes and concepts. These included thoughts, feelings, questions, and concerns that emerged repeatedly in the narrative. For example, what were my chief concerns throughout my gender transition? What were/are the repeated feeling states I have experienced? What were/remain the primary concerns or questions of those around me? How have I negotiated my identity in these varying relational contexts? How have others responded to me in these different contexts?

**Evaluative Criteria**

The criteria used to judge narrative ethnographies must be different from those used to evaluate traditional science and even most forms of qualitative research. Within post-modern approaches to research practice, Gannon and Davies (2012) argue that objectivity must be carefully re-examined as any account is always situated in a particular context. From this lens it is always “an account from somewhere, and sometime, and someone, written for some purpose, and with a particular audience in mind” (p. 66). In this sense, it is always also a partial account –
one that has its own power to produce new ways of seeing, and that should always be open to contestation” (ibid). As they articulate it, we can no longer rely on the stability of an “objective” truth, but rather on being consistently transparent and accountable for what and how we are able to see. There is no single truth; all knowledge is partial. In this sense, my autoethnographic narrative will be “true” for me and “valid” because it is “my narrative” and represents “my truth” as I understand it.

According to Ellis, Adams, and Bochner (2011), validity means that the work seeks verisimilitude; it evokes in readers a feeling that the experience described is lifelike, believable, and possible, a feeling that what has been represented could be true. In this sense it asks if the story has coherence. Does it seem credible? Related questions regarding autoethnographic validity include: Does it help readers communicate with others different from themselves? Does it offer a way to improve the lives of readers, the researcher, and participants? How useful is the story? To what uses might the story be put?

Reliability in traditional research frameworks seeks to generalize from the particular to the universal. However this is not the goal of narrative research. Narrative research specifically seeks to uphold, draw forth, and highlight the fact that knowledge which is unique and particular. As noted earlier, it often calls forth the voices and stories typically missing in dominant research paradigms. The data presented is told from a very personal evocative standpoint that allows readers to judge for themselves.

Ellis, Adams, and Bochner (2011) suggest that while generalizability remains important, it must be understood differently. From their perspective, our own lives are particular, but they are also typical and generalizable since we all participate in a limited number of cultures and institutions. Both this particularity and the more universal themes should be conveyed in the
narrative. Generalizability is then tested by the readers as they determine if the narrative speaks to them about their experiences or about the lives of others they know. Key questions include: Is the researcher able to illuminate unfamiliar cultural practices? Does it bring “felt news” from one world to another?

Additional questions of reliability address the researcher’s credibility. Could the author have had the experiences described, given available factual evidence? Has the narrator taken literary license to the point that the story is better viewed as fiction than a truthful account? (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011)

Another criterion unique to autoethnography is whether the end product is aesthetic and evocative? Does it engage readers and use conventions of story-telling? Is it designed to bring readers “into the scene,” particularly into thoughts, emotions, and actions? (Ellis & Bochner, 2000).

Narrative projects must also be assessed by their “personal, relational, and cultural consequences” (Tillman-Healy, 2002, p. 340). Valid narrative ethnography inspires “critical reflection” on the reader’s own story; it enables the reader to “recontextualize what they already knew in light of their encounter with someone else’s life or culture” (Bochner & Ellis, 1996, pp. 22-23). The text rises and falls on its capacity to provoke readers to broaden their horizons, reflect critically on their own experience, enter empathically into worlds of experience different from their own, and actively engage in dialogue regarding the social and moral implications of the different perspectives and standpoints encountered (Ellis & Bochner, 2000).
Critiques of Autoethnography

Ellis (Pelias, et al, 2008) notes that autoethnography is typically critiqued from three different sectors. More traditional social science researchers critique autoethnography for being insufficiently rigorous or analytic; they cite it for having “suspect” data that is too subjective and for placing too much emphasis on the literary, therapeutic, or aesthetic; in other words, for not being legitimate social science. Second, poststructuralists criticize autoethnography for placing too much focus on events and realism and not enough emphasis on theory and analysis. Third, literary evaluators critique autoethnography for being overly concerned with acceptance from science, for not being well written, or not having sufficient literary value.

It is true as Ruiz-Junco and Vidal-Ortiz (2011) point out, that autoethnography creates significant challenges for more traditional research models that are invested in conventional notions of objectivity. But as addressed earlier, autoethnography operates in a more post-modern, post-structuralist paradigm where there is no single, apprehendable reality or truth; all truth, and all narrative, is partial.

In support of autoethnography, advocates hold that this method offers unique possibilities and insights not easily available in more traditional models of research. In particular, the way it uses the personal to explicate the social, cultural, and political often enables these studies to uncover hidden biases and assumptions. In this sense, autoethnography holds great potential for challenging the status quo (Ruiz-Junco & Vidal-Ortiz, 2011, p. 204). Three recent such social work autoethnographic articles include:

Despite the criticism, I believe autoethnographic research can be rigorous in its recreation of the details of lived experience. It can be grounded in the theoretical literature about
gender practices, sexuality, and heteronormativity. And, it can be critically analytic of the social and cultural worlds which we inhabit. Autoethnographic studies can be inclusive of personal, social, and structural phenomena. At the same time, these narratives can also be aesthetic, emotional, and therapeutic; (Holman Jones, 2005, p. 764).

**Relational Ethics/Protection of Human Subjects**

Given the ways autoethnographic narratives are embedded in social interaction, autoethnographers not only implicate themselves with their work, but also close, intimate others. The personal nature of the narratives means it is not always possible to mask the identity of these others in the researcher’s story. Consequently ethical issues are critical.

In writing about the ways other people are always present in our autoethnographic accounts, either as “active participants in the story or as associates in the background,” Chang (2008) urges protecting the privacy of these others (p. 68). Adams (2011) urges protecting the privacy of others in queer narratives because of the ways LGBT persons continue to experience harassment and discrimination. He suggests masking or altering identifying details such as “context, topics discussed, and a person’s race, gender, or name” (p. 162). However, Chang (2008) notes that this is not always possible. Given my visibility in the world, the identities of others in my story may become known to the general public or to smaller circles of acquaintances. However, ultimately I believe I was able to adequately disguise identities other than members of my immediate family.

Another concern involved the risks inherent to telling my own story in such a transparent manner. Autoethnography requires that the researcher themselves – with all their strengths and
weaknesses - become highly visible, and thus vulnerable. Given the stigmatization of transgender men in our culture, one might wonder why take this risk? Why risk such vulnerability personally and professionally? Regarding publically being out as a trans man, Jamison Green (1999) writes:

At first I thought my transition was about not being looked at any longer, about my relief from scrutiny; now I know it is about scrutiny itself, about self-examination, and about losing my own fear of being looked at, not because I can disappear, but because I am able to claim my unique difference at last. What good is safety if the price is shame and fear of discovery? (p. 130)

I have written an autoethnographic dissertation precisely because I want to trouble the boundaries between cisgender people and transgender men. I want to break through the distance that posits transgender men as different, and thus “other.” I want to reach for what is human, and thus vulnerable, in each of us. I want to do this even if it means risking my vulnerability as a man, father, social worker, and professor.

At the same time, I do not take these risks lightly. I had a small community of colleagues and friends who read my narrative, who supported me in this endeavor to recount my truth, who challenged me to both deeply immerse myself in this project and simultaneously remind me to step outside it and remember that I am more than my vulnerability.

Despite the inherent risks and the frequent critiques from more traditional research circles, Ruiz-Junco and Vidal-Ortiz (2011) suggest that the academe take “less of a ‘gate-keeping’ role and more of a nurturing move forward” when it comes to autoethnographic studies (p. 206). They claim that this methodology has already made significant contributions in the study of emotions, body, and embodiment and urge researchers to expand autoethnographic studies to explore issue of racism, sexism, and homophobia (p. 207).

In this section the rationale has been presented for autoethnography as the method of choice to study of the lived experience of one transgender man as he navigates his identity within
varying relational contexts. The method has been situated within the rich history of qualitative research and within streams of heuristic research, ethnography, and narrative/life history research in particular. Autoethnography offers the unique opportunity to uncover details of everyday life that might otherwise be missed with the use of alternate methods. It dissolves the barriers between insider and outsider and invites readers into the life experience of the researched. Most importantly, autoethnography offers the possibility of connecting with readers beyond the academe and thus, its potential for social change is unique.
Coming out as Transgender: Autobiographical Sketch

I grew up as a tomboy with some sense that I was gender different, Born in 1958. I was raised in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania as the oldest of four siblings in a fundamentalist Baptist white family. My ethic origins are Irish, German and Dutch. My family was middle class, though my grandparents were working class and poor.

Growing up in a conservative Baptist environment, I never even heard the word lesbian, let alone transsexual. Yet by age 9, I was hoarding toilet paper tubes so I could pee standing up. By age 12, I was depressed and suicidal. I spent my adolescence nearly drinking & drugging myself to death trying to numb out all the ways it felt like my body was betraying me. I hated the way my chest was changing. I hated the monthly menstrual reminders that my body didn’t match the way I felt inside. But I didn’t have words to describe what was going on inside me and I was afraid to speak the truth. As a teenager, I knew I was attracted to girls so when I discovered that there was such a thing as a lesbian, I figured that is what I must be. Then I discovered there were “butch” lesbians and I thought maybe this fit me. At least, with this identity I could dress in a more masculine way that was comfortable for me.

I came out the first time as a lesbian during undergraduate school and became actively involved in the lesbian feminist movement during my twenties. During my early 30’s, I sobered up in a twelve step program and this helped lessen the depression I had struggled with. In my early 40’s, I began processing gender identity issues more explicitly. It took a long time for me to say the word transgender out loud in reference to myself. But in 2007 at the age of 48, I came out publically as a transgender man. I immediately began to transition and live full time as a man.
My graduate degrees are in Divinity and Social Work and I have alternately worked as a pastor and a clinical social worker. In the latter capacity, I have worked in mental health and substance abuse with adolescents and adults. For much of the past 25 years I have worked in the LGBTQ communities. Currently I teach full time at Columbia University School of Social Work and maintain a private clinical practice. I also train extensively on work with transgender and gender nonconforming people.

Today I am married to a woman and have three children and two grandchildren. My oldest daughter came into my life when she was 14 years old and I was part of a long term lesbian relationship. Consequently she has known me both pre and post transition. My son (now 25 years old) came into my life 4 years ago when he was aging out of foster care. Given this, he has only known me post transition. My wife was a single Mom by choice and her daughter was 5 years old when my wife and I met in 2010. Consequently her (and now my) daughter has only known me post transition.

My studies about gender and gender identity, my explorations around heteronormativity and masculinity, alongside my work and life as an out transgender man, have led me to choose an autoethnographic dissertation about the day-to-day lived experiences of one transgender man.
Identity Negotiated

In contemporary society, issues of identity are at the core of living as a man or as a woman, but arguably more so as a transgender man or woman. Transgender identity is continually negotiated and re-negotiated in the context of everyday life – on the streets and subways, at professional conferences, at gas stations and corner deli’s, in restrooms and locker rooms, in our faith communities, with friends and family, at healthcare facilities, at the local barber shop, at our children’s elementary schools, anywhere and everywhere gender is considered salient. Identifying as transgender heightens the stakes of these transactions. And, it is not something one can accomplish and leave behind. Instead, transgender men “perform” and “re-enact” their gendered identities day in and day out in the varying relational contexts of their lives. Unlike the professional actor who leaves his fictional identity behind him once the play is performed and the curtain falls, the transgender man plays the role endlessly.

These three data chapters are composed of narrative vignettes about experiences requiring role-performance as a transgender man. Most stories have a beginning, middle, and an end; however like my performance as a transgendered man, the story in this study doesn’t really have an ending. This is because for transgender persons, coming out never ends; it is an ongoing interaction throughout one’s life cycle. The vignettes scattered throughout this study and my ongoing work with transgender men overwhelmingly testify to this dynamic.

Keith Berry (2013) suggests that for some people, identity is not a matter of formation but of negotiation. As I reflect on my own journey, there has never been a time when I was not negotiating my gendered identity in the world, whether it was during my childhood years as a
“tomboy”, my early adult life as a gender queer “butch” dyke, the beginning of my gender transition, or my more recent years living as a (transgender) man.

Given this, staged models of transgender identity development are often inadequate (Eliason & Schope, 2007). These models typically focus on the coming out process. They generally posit that there is an observable moment when one begins to claim an identity and a final moment of arrival/completion/maturity; staged models typically end with someone transitioning and then moving on by integrating their trans identity into all of who they are (but this is not exactly how it works); staged models imply an essential, static, stable identity that needs to be “discovered;” and staged models suggest that being “out” is essential to psychological health and well-being. A close examination of this trans man’s life suggests that staged models of identity simply do not account for the varied and ongoing and ubiquitous ways transgender people must constantly navigate their identities – both prior to, during, and long after, “officially” transitioning (living and being read consistently as a man).

In an article on cisgender gay men, Orne (2011) coins the term “strategic outness” to refer to the ongoing nature of the coming out process. In keeping with Goffman’s notion of performing our identities, Orne argues that we need to shift the lens from that of identity development to one of identity management. Rather than the coming out process having an end point to (as typically posited in identity development or coming out models), strategic outness describes coming out as a continual, contextual process in which people are never fully “out” or “closeted “- but make situationally-determined choices about how “out” they will be. Given the many varied and continually emerging relational contexts of LGBT persons’ lives, the psychotherapeutic value of complete disclosure and total transparency is impossible for anyone to achieve. Orne holds that our coming out is a social phenomenon, one that is always embedded
within specific social relationships and interactions (Orne, 2011, p. 688). Given the complexity of LGBT life in a hetero-dominant society, the clinical ideal of possessing and displaying an “authentic” self is even more elusive.

Drawing on the metaphor of society as a theatrical performance in which each of us is a performer, Goffman (1959) discussed the way our identities are continually negotiated. As social beings, he contends, we are constantly performing our “self,” complete with roles, masks, and scripts. He describes our selves as a multiplicity of roles/presentations that we strategically employ in varying relational contexts. This can be seen in the ways our demeanor/presentation varies with parents, siblings, coworkers, neighbors, strangers, and others. As the audience varies with each performance, our performance/life necessitates a continually evolving self.

Goffman (1959) posited that there are different kinds of stages on which our selves are performed – a “front stage” with the main audience/public and a “back stage” area where we theoretically relax and drop our roles and masks. As a professor, the front stage would be when I am in the classroom with my students; the back stage, the faculty lounge, my office, or even more so, when I am in the privacy of my home with my family. If I have an office in my home, my behavior may differ as well in that room than in any other in my home.

However, Goffman (1959) was quick to point out that even when we are totally “back stage” we are still performing to varying degrees, albeit to a different kind of audience. In many ways, back stage I leave behind the role of a professor, and here I take on another role of father. Really I am both roles in both places – always performing both roles – the father who is a professor, and at school, the professor who is a father. Our performance involves both the impressions we intend to convey by what we say as well as those impressions inadvertently conveyed through body language and facial expression. He posits that our roles/selves vary
because the performance is always an interaction between the performer/self and that particular audience. Consequently, our self is continually co-constructed in the context of social interaction.

Goffman’s (1959) theoretical stance rejected the prevailing psychoanalytic perspective that human beings had a core self which could be uncovered or revealed and changed through therapy. His was a critical movement away from essentialism. Furthermore, his work did not focus on what might be termed the differences between a public (and thus, false) self and a more private/true/real self. For Goffman, acting was an “existential metaphor” that illuminates the ways each of us, as selves/performers is constantly managing how others see/experience us (Tseêlon, 2000). The dramaturgical metaphor highlights the premise that we must continually negotiate our identity across varying relational contexts.

Goffman (1979) believed this was also true for our gendered identities. He posited that when people interact they tend to assume the other possesses an “essential nature,” a nature that can be discerned through the “natural signs given off or expressed by them” (p. 75). This includes signs about our “feminine” and “masculine” natures, which Goffman termed “gender displays.” As he stated, if gender represents the “culturally established correlates of sex (whether in consequence of biology or learning), then gender display refers to conventionalized portrayals of these correlates” (p.69).

The following vignette illustrates one moment of gender identity negotiation in a presumably unambiguous medical/bureaucratic context.

Early on in my medical transition I made an appointment with a gynecologist for an annual exam. This is something trans men continue to need unless they have completed genital/lower surgery. I arrived at the midtown east location in my usual suit and tie. Even though it was first thing in the morning, the well-appointed office was busy.
As I walked up to the receptionist desk, I was aware that I was the only person in the waiting room dressed as a man. When I said I had an eight a.m. appointment with the doctor, without a hesitation, the receptionist asked, “What company are you with?” I stammered that I wasn’t with a company; the appointment was gynecological. After a blank stare, she busied herself checking me in as a female patient. A minute later she handed me a small plastic cup with a lid, and said, “Here, you can take this to the ladies room.”

In their classic article, “Doing Gender,” West and Zimmerman (1987) move beyond Goffman to argue that gender is a “routine, methodical, and recurring accomplishment” (p. 126), an ongoing activity embedded in our everyday interactions” (p. 130). From their perspective, doing gender is something all of us do every day; it is not something any of us can decline to do.

To make their point, they draw on Garfinkel’s (1967) case study of Agnes. Agnes was raised as a boy, but began living as a woman at age 17. She initially presented to the medical establishment as intersex but later came out as a transsexual woman. Both Garfinkel (1967), and later West and Zimmerman (1987), use Agnes to demonstrate how gender is created through interaction. Essentially they utilize an “outlier” case, a transgender person, who has to visibly do gender every day to illustrate the more hidden processes in which all persons participate. As West and Zimmerman (1987) put it, “Agnes’ case makes visible what culture has made invisible – the accomplishment of gender” (131).

In discussing gender as a situated doing, West and Zimmerman (1987) define sex as a set of socially agreed upon biological criteria, typically genitalia at birth. They define sex category as the everyday socially required identificatory displays that proclaim one’s membership in a sex category. Gender on the other hand, refers to the activity of managing situated conduct in light of normative conceptions of attitudes and actions considered appropriate to one’s sex category.
(p.127). In terms of Agnes, they note that she did not possess the socially agreed upon biological criteria for classification as a female, yet she still believed herself to be a woman and adopted female gender displays. In fact, Garfinkel (1967) called Agnes the “120% woman” in recognition of her intent to fully adhere to female gender constructs. These female characteristics Agnes takes on are called insignia (West & Zimmerman, 1987, p.132) – those traits and attributes that signify one’s gender and membership in a sex category.

The following vignette in yet another normative medical establishment highlights the ongoing nature of gender displays and insignia.

Some years later, I made an appointment with a different gynecologist. This one had his office in a major city hospital and held monthly afternoon health clinics for transgender people. Still when I gave my name to the receptionist, she said incredulously, “You’re here to see Dr. X?” After checking me in, she gave me some paperwork for the doctor, and sent me to another waiting area. As I looked through the paperwork, I saw an “F” on the appointment sheet next to the box for gender. This was true even though I made the appointment as Elijah Nealy and the identity documents I gave them all clearly said “male.” The point here is not who is at fault for these transactional miscues, but that they are ubiquitous and demand at least situational negotiation and resolution.

In both medical vignettes, I displayed all the appropriate male insignia – suit and tie, male hair cut, facial hair, deep voice, male name. In the first vignette, the receptionist could not make sense of my identity as a supposedly male-bodied person in a gynecological office. In the second vignette, despite my male insignia, my gender marker was listed as female because in that context there was no room for a male to need gynecological services.

In each case, because of the gap between their assumptions about my sex and my gender, my identity was erased. In each case I was forced to come out as a transgender man in order to resolve the confusion. In each case, I was once again “doing gender,” defined by West and Zimmerman (1987) as a “situated doing, carried out in the virtual or real presence of others who
are presumed to be oriented to its production” (p. 126). While West and Zimmerman would say we are all always doing gender, there is a particular way in which my doing gender in these vignettes erased my identity as a man, a particular way in which I had to negotiate my male identity in each scenario.

Identity Contested

The *Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (Goffman, 1959) focuses extensively on social interactions that provoke feelings of embarrassment, shame, and/or humiliation. Schudson (2000) notes that Goffman’s sociology is rooted in the premise that “embarrassment is of fundamental social and moral significance” (p. 3). Goffman (1959) states that embarrassment typically occurs when events occur that discredit or throw doubt on the performance of the actor and/on contested definitions of the immediate social situation as perceived by both the actor and the audience.

At such moments the individual whose presentation has been discredited may feel ashamed while the others present may feel hostile, and all the participants may come to feel ill at ease, non-plussed, out of countenance, embarrassed, experiencing the kind of anomy that is generated when the minute social system of face-to-face interaction breaks down (Goffman, 1959, p. 12). Consequently, the performers/selves in Goffman’s dramaturgical model actively attempt to anticipate and prevent and/or at the very least manage these feeling states before/as they occur in the interaction order. For Goffman, these discordant and discrediting moments lift the curtain on and reveal the rules that truly govern social interaction.

In his work on stigma, Goffman (1963) defines that concept as “an attribute that is deeply discrediting” (p. 3). Goffman describes three different stigmatized groups. The first are those
with “tribal stigmas” which are inherited from one’s family, such as race/ethnicity, religion, initial class status. The second are those with “body abominations,” supposed deviations from “normal” bodies, such as those with physical disabilities and “deformities.” The third group is comprised of those with “character blemishes,” individuals about whom society holds a negative evaluation of that person’s behavior/lifestyle, such as sex workers, drug users, and the mentally ill.

For Goffman (1963) these categories are not necessarily discrete. In fact, transgender persons typically occupy both the second (bodily) and the third (character) stigmata. He proposes that a person becomes stigmatized when a disparity emerges between that person’s virtual (expected, imagined) psychological identity and their externally received (and stigmatized) social identity. This stigmatized attribute “reduces the bearer from a whole and usual person to a tainted, discounted one” (p.3). It is in this sense that transgender identities are not only continually negotiated, but frequently contested and psycho-socially discordant.

**You are not a “real” human being**

As illustrated in the two gynecologist office visits cited above, the ongoing reality of managing my transgender male identity poses a constant challenge to an integrated sense of self – hoping to experience myself and be experienced by others as “real,” “normal”, and ultimately, “human”. Despite my male name, my unambiguous male gender presentation, and male identity documents, I was directed to the “Ladies” room in the first doctor’s office and my paperwork stated that I was a “female” in the second. Although both situations were admittedly socially ambiguous, the underlying message in both read: *You are not who you claim to be. We do not see*
you (as a man). Of course an alternative and perhaps more parsimonious explanation might be that anyone seeking a medical appointment with a gynecologist must, by definition, be a woman. Nonetheless, from my vantage point, both experiences were demeaning and involved a public contest of my performances as a man and my deeply felt sense of self.

In discussing the social impact of stigma, Goffman (1963) describes that moment in a social interaction in which we meet someone and become aware that this person possesses an attribute that makes the person different from our self. When this difference is of a less desirable kind, Goffman suggests this person is “reduced in our minds from a whole and usual person to a tainted, discounted one” (pp. 2-3). This is at the core of how stigma impacts our daily interactions as human beings. Goffman goes on to observe, “when that trait is manifest, it turns those of us he meets away from him, breaking the claim that his other attributes have on us… by definition, we believe the person with a stigma is not quite human” (p. 5).

In particular, for trans persons one way their humanity is denied lies in failing to recognize or acknowledge their identified gender. Bettcher (2009) writes, “If others do not accept my gender aspirations, then in effect they are not accepting me as a person. They are engaging in one of the most fundamental forms of disrespect” (p. 105). The following vignette illustrates how my humanity is both challenged and invalidated.

About six months after beginning testosterone treatment, I went for routine blood work at a lab in Greenwich Village, New York City. By this time, I was fairly consistently being “read” as male in social situations. The facility was in a cramped basement room with low ceilings. It was late morning on a hot summer day. I signed in and took a seat in the small crowded reception area.

A short while later, I heard my name, “Elijah,” called.

As I moved toward the receptionist she began reviewing my computer file. A puzzled look came over her face.
“You’re Elijah?” she asked.

I nodded yes.

“But it says “female” here,” she said.

I took a deep breath and began, “I’m a transgender man and my identity documents say male…”

Her immediate frown almost stopped us both.

“My health insurance card stills has an “F” on it” I pointed out, “so I can be sure to have coverage if I need any gynecological care.”

Tapping her pencil repeatedly on the desk, she stared at me, and then asked in a voice loud enough for everyone in the waiting room to hear, “Well, what are you then?”

This vignette and Goffman’s (1963) many other examples of stigma illustrate the way in which knowledge of the stigma diminishes a person’s sense of their own humanity and disrupts claims their other attributes have on us. It is the way stigma reduces one’s humanity that allows a medical staff member to impatiently ask, “What are you then?” as if I were an object rather than a human being.

It is the way stigma reduces someone’s humanity that permits people who know that I am a transman and strangers who suspect so to ask intrusive questions about my body or genitals, such as, “Have you had the surgery yet?”, or “Are you pre-op or post-op?” Goffman (1963) notes that the discredited person is “likely to feel that to be present among normals [what Goffman calls persons without a stigma] nakedly exposes him to invasions of privacy. This displeasure in being exposed can be increased by the conversation strangers may feel free to strike up with him, conversations in which they express what he takes to be a morbid curiosity in his condition “ (p. 16).

Rendering a stigmatized person less than human allows for, and even encourages, the verbal harassment and violence so many transgender people encounter. In addressing these
realities Judith Butler (2004) writes that, “certain lives are not considered lives at all, they cannot be humanized… this level gives rise to a physical violence that in some sense delivers the message of dehumanization which is already at work in the culture” (p. 25).

Butler (2004) goes on to note that we must understand that [human] lives are “supported and maintained differentially, that there are radically different ways in which human physical vulnerability is distributed across the globe. Certain lives will be highly protected, and the abrogation of their claims to sanctity will be sufficient to mobilize the forces of war. And other lives will not find such fast and furious support and will not even qualify as “grievable” (p. 24). Essentially Butler argues that not all lives count as human, or that some lives count as more fully human and worthwhile than do others. In this schema, trans lives, gender non-normative lives, count less than cisgender, gender normative lives do. The ways in which some lives are not even grievable particularly impacts trans people of color and poor trans people.

Goffman’s (1963) work on stigma and Butler’s (2000) later work on liminal subjects suggest that this is the way in which trans people and their lives become less than human. It is the way their other human attributes are erased once their “stigma” is revealed. Consequently both the discredited (those whose stigma is visible/known) and the discreditable person (those whose stigma is invisible/not known) typically approach most social situations with anxiety because they perceive, often correctly, that whatever others profess, they do not really accept him as fully human (Goffman, 1963, p.7). This means trans men who can generally “pass” as men (i.e., the discreditable) often still wonder whether others’ deeper perceptions of them will change if they learn they are transgender. Trans men like myself are continually assessing whether another person will treat them differently once that person finds out about my
transgender history. Navigating these historical realities and future possibilities on a day-in, day-out basis requires tremendous mental and emotional stamina.

You are not a “real” man

Fifty years ago Erving Goffman (1963) wrote:

In America, there is only “one complete, unblushing male”: a young, married, white, urban, northern, heterosexual, Protestant father of college education, fully employed, of good complexion, weight and height, and a decent record of sports. Every American male tends to look out upon the world from this perspective… Any male who fails to qualify in any one of these ways is likely to view himself… as unworthy, incomplete, and inferior (p. 128).

With the emergence of the feminist theory, what Goffman then described came to be known as “hegemonic masculinity” - that form of masculinity, at any given time in place and history, esteemed to be only way to be a man in society (Connell, 1987, 1995; Carrigan, Connell, & Lee, 2002). While only a minority of men in the culture actually meet its demands, it is considered “normative” in the sense of an ideal rather than as a statistical commonplace. Feminism notwithstanding, large numbers of men remain complicit in sustaining it aspirationally, even if they cannot attain the standards of hegemonic masculinity (Carrigan, Connell, & Lee, 2002; Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005).

Central to the hierarchy of hegemonic masculinity is its position of dominance over women, as well as the subordination of varying forms of masculinity and other men. This framework is rooted in fear - fear that other men will challenge our masculinity and prove to the world that we are not “real” men. It is the fear of being humiliated in front of other men. This fear drives American men to maintain a hyper-masculine front in everything they do – what they wear, how they talk, how they walk, what they eat. As Kimmel (2003) notes, “every mannerism,
every movement, contains a coded gender language” (p. 65). It is in this sense that homophobia, sexism, transphobia, heterosexism, and hegemonic masculinity are intertwined.

Kimmel (2003) posits that it is this fear of being seen as unmanly that propels American men to invidiously deny manhood to other men. The very definition of hegemonic masculinity was constructed to prevent others from achieving it, lest they topple the “real” men at the top of the hierarchy. Throughout American history, these “other” men were variously identified as racial/ethnic minority men, disabled men, immigrant men, homosexual men, and in many cases today, transgender men.

The following vignette illustrates another of the ways in which as a trans man, my male identity and masculinity was contested

Several years ago, I moved to Yonkers and found a Saturday morning men’s twelve step meeting in which I chose to participate. Each week the room is filled with 40-50 men ranging in age from 16-85 years old. They’re mostly white, with a few African American and Latino men present. The sharing is incredibly down to earth and sometimes brutally honest. No topic is off limits here. I mean, when’s the last time you sat in a room and listened to 40 men talk about sex, drugs, and prayer in graphic and intimate detail—all in one hour?

Meetings are also filled with laughter. Men “bust” on each other throughout the meeting. The first time I was there I shared about having to make an amends to my wife and my 6 year old daughter because I had given someone the finger that week as I was driving. When I finished sharing, this guy I’d never met yelled across the room, “Yo, Eli!” and cheerfully gave me the finger.

From the moment I walked through the door and found this group of men, I felt remarkably and unusually comfortable. The feeling of comfort persisted throughout the meetings. It felt like “home”. I loved the raucous combination of the laughter and honesty. On the other hand, I’ve often wondered what these men would think if they knew my history as a transgender man. Would they still see me the same way? Would they still accept me? Would that one fact change everything?
Late one Sunday morning one of the guys and I met for breakfast at a crowded diner in suburban Westchester County, New York. The place was packed with folks coming in to eat after church. Finally we got a table at the far end of the diner and settled into our own little universe talking together. At one point it suddenly seemed clear that I needed to share my history as a transgender man for him to really understand the particular situation I was describing in our conversation. Anything else seemed dishonest or at least incomplete.

What followed next was a conversation that was all too familiar to me. Initially, he didn’t comprehend what I was saying. He thought I was saying that I was a man who wanted to be a woman. I kept trying to explain what “transgender man” meant, that I had been born with a girl’s body but always had felt like a guy and some years ago transitioned to live as a man. But he just couldn’t wrap his brain around it. At one point, he asked me at least three times, “But do you have a vagina? You know, Eli, a vagina? Do you have a vagina?”

To digress momentarily, before I came out as trans, I never had someone ask me what my genitals looked like, but trans people get asked that question all the time. Although it is an incredibly invasive question, those who ask, even those who barely know you, seem to feel no compunction about asking. As my new friend grilled me about the shape of my body parts that morning, I felt hugely attacked. That question, or the question of whether or not you’ve had “the surgery,” carries the implication that the questioner wants to know whether you are “real” yet – as if the shape of our bodies was the sole and essential determinant of what it means to be a man or a woman in this culture. It cuts to the heart of what transgender people face throughout their lifetimes, namely, “If I come out to you as a person of trans experience, will you still see me as a real man or woman?” And, perhaps more important, “will you credit me with being human?”

I knew this guy’s heart was in the right place, but I drove home that day in a daze. Suddenly our growing friendship was in serious jeopardy. I felt overloaded and shut down. I wanted to block out the whole interaction. I wondered, why are these coming out moments so incredibly difficult? Why do they feel so traumatizing?
It’s certainly not like this was the first time I’d had an experience like this. I thought back to that moment getting blood work done at a lab in Greenwich Village. And I thought back to the family therapy conference where I had first announced my transition in a professional meeting. I thought of a dozen other times I had come out as transgender and someone hadn’t understood, hadn’t gotten it, or had asked me about what my body (read genitals) looked like now. I should be used to this. I should almost anticipate this. But no matter how many years I was post-transition, no matter how many times I had come out already, the interaction is always deeply disturbing.

Goffman (1963) writes, “The central feature of the stigmatized individual’s situation in life… is a question of what is often, if vaguely, called ‘acceptance.’ Those who have dealings with him fail to accord him the respect and regard which the uncontaminated aspects of his social identity have led them to anticipate extending, and have led him to anticipate receiving” (p.8). He goes on to note that the stigmatized person can never be certain of how he will be received, whether others will accept him or reject him, and that this is a daily negotiation and trauma.

No matter how much I worked on my internalized shame, no matter how confident I had become most of the time, even though I was reputed to be a successful trans “role model” and a gender specialist and worked as a therapist with other trans clients and their struggles much of the time, I still couldn’t be sure that people really saw me the way I saw myself. It sometimes felt as if as long as I kept quiet about my history, I passed (was read as a man) and no one knew the difference. But if I came out, I could never quite relax and trust that I was just “one of the guys.” I would always have to wonder whether they saw me as a “real” guy or someone just “pretending” to be a guy.

Being out about your trans-ness, and thus being discredited as a transgender man, can bring a constant need to “prove” your masculinity. Are you a “real” man, Eli, or do you have a
vagina? Time and time again, the question confronting the trans guys with whom I work is, if I come out as a transgender man, will you ever just see me as a regular guy?

Sitting in my clinical office, a sixteen year old trans man asks if he’ll ever feel like his girlfriend really sees him as a “normal” guy. A gay trans man describes the way he never feels “man enough” lying naked next to a cisgender gay man because his body is different. A forty year old man early in his transition says to me, “Sometimes I feel so disingenuous. People who knew me before I began to transition still see me the old way; they don’t think I’m a real man.” Another trans guy talks about a friend of his who posted a picture of them together on Facebook from back when they were in high school. “What if a future lover sees this?” he asked me. “Will he think I’m not a real man?” A young trans guy with a developmental disability sobs about how his father says to him, “Bob, Brenda, whatever.” “He doesn’t think I’m a real guy.”

This continual challenge to their manhood dogs my trans male clients, colleagues, and friends. The “real” answer can never be known. Even when the response may seem accepting, trans guys know in their hearts that the other person may be defining in them in terms of their trans-ness. There is thus a constant sense of not knowing what others are really thinking about you. As Goffman (1963) suggests, “the stigmatized person is likely to feel he must be ‘on’ in all social situations, having to be self-conscious and deliberate about the impression he is making” (p. 14). This hypervigilance is psychologically demanding and costly.

Identity Affirmed

I spent years feeling invisible growing up. Years feeling like my sense of myself was always in question, never affirmed or validated. Years hearing people call me a “girl,” when my
own inner voice said “boy” or “young man.” Finally well into my adult life I found the courage to begin transitioning and begin living into my true psychological and corresponding social identity in the world as a man.

This speaks to the critical importance of our identity being affirmed, accepted, and validated by others. Without this, trans men experience the trauma of not being seen for who they are and/or having their identities denied and/or invalidated, as reflected in the vignette about coming out to one of the men in my twelve step men’s group.

Devor (2004) suggests that when “the messages one receives back from others do not match how one feels inside, various kinds of psychological distress and maladaptive behaviors can result,” including even psychotic or suicidal behaviors (p.46). In fact as suggested in the previous section on identity contested, this trauma is not only about having your self invalidated or denied, but also about having your worth and humanity questioned and/or denied.

In Goffman’s (1959) work on the presentation of self, he argues that we are all to some degree, performing our identities, our selves. He emphasizes that our basic human needs for acknowledgement and acceptance drive the identity management process. Our primary concern, according to him, is that our performance be credible, that it be believable, to those around us—especially to those who are important to us. Ultimately, however, we want both our intimates and those who barely know us to see and believe us for who we claim to be. Unless we are intentionally dissimulating (as with confidence men and other forms of scammers) that which we claim to be, is who we feel we truly are.

It is this basic human need for acceptance and affirmation that is typically absent in many transgender people’s lives prior to transition. Consequently, the process of physical transition can
often bring tremendous affirmation and healing. Slowly we begin to see ourselves on the outside as we have always seen ourselves on the inside.

Waskul and Vannini (2006) posit that the body is always more than just a tangible, physical, corporeal object; it is simultaneously an “enormous vessel of meaning of utmost significance to both personhood and society” (p. 3). Embodiment, they suggest, is that process by which the “object-body is actively experienced, produced, sustained, and/or transformed as a subject-body” (ibid). This body-self is not static, but rather subjectively embodied in a fluid, continually emergent and negotiated process of being (Waskul & van der Riet, 2002, p. 510).

In Second Skins: The Body Narratives of Transsexuality, Prosser (1998) articulates embodiment as the central emphasis of transsexuality. Written from the perspective of a trans man, his text highlights the unique concerns for transsexual persons between the material body and body image, in his description of the importance of feeling “at home” in one’s skin (Johnson, 2012). For transgender men, the material body is the physical body as it literally is constructed; it is the body parts that one can visually see.

The body image, on the other hand, is the “projected surface of the body as it is felt to be through the experience of bodily sensations (Prosser, 1998, p. 99). The body image is how transgender men imagine – and literally experience – their bodies to be configured and shaped. It is derived from both projected internal sensations and the physical experience of those sensations. This body image, for most transgender men, is an “intensely sensory, visceral experience,” that can be called “body feelings” with all the reality of any other physical sensations (ibid, p. 70).

The discrepancy transgender men feel between the material body and their body image can lead to significant trauma (currently diagnosed and medically labeled as “gender dysphoria,”
APA, 2014, p. 452). Prosser (1998) identifies two body image distortions many trans men experience. The first is body agnosia, or the forgetting of specific body parts. The second is phantomization, or the ability to imagine body parts that have been “lost” or that should have always been present. For transgender men, it is the body image that has material force, rather than the physical body itself (p. 100). Prosser goes on to highlight the ability to feel “at home in one’s skin” as essential to all human beings’ well-being, noting that one can only experience this sense of being “at home” if one’s material body and body image correspond (p. 73).

The physical transition most trans men undergo is designed to transform a deeply felt conflict between material body and body image, and thereby bring the two into alignment. The inappropriateness is located in the material body, thus leading to the desire for hormones and surgical intervention. From this perspective, physical transition is a “restoration of the body” as it should have been from birth (Prosser, 1998, p. 88).

In reflecting on one transgender narrative of body image versus material body Prosser (1998) concludes:

My contention is that transsexuals continue to deploy the image of wrong embodiment because being trapped in the wrong body is simply what transsexuality feels like. If the goal of transsexual transition is to align the feelings of gendered embodiment with material body, body image – which we might be tempted to align with the imaginary – clearly already has a material force for transsexuals. The image of being trapped in the wrong body conveys this force. It suggests how body image is radically split off from the material body in the first place, how body image can feel sufficiently substantial as to persuade the transsexual to alter his or her own body to conform to it (p. 69).

The above quote is one narrative for transgender experience. Illustrating the force of these thoughts, moving forward with my own physical transition was healing and affirming. Seeing and experiencing my male self visibly for the first time – my shifting physical image, my body changing and becoming more recognizably male, my sexuality more fully embodying my
male self. All these experiences touched me deeply. The following vignette and journal notes speak to this experience.

When I wake up in the morning today and look at myself in the mirror, I want to laugh out loud with joy because I can finally see myself. The squareness of my face, the sideburns, mustache, and goatee, even my receding hairline. The me I always knew inside is finally visible outside; I finally look like me.

I vividly remember the day about a year into my physical transition when I walked my dog, Jack, in the park and realized that for the first time I could see myself reflected in the world around me. As I passed other men walking their dogs, it suddenly came to me. “They’re like me! I’m like them!”

I had my “top surgery” (chest reconstruction) at an outpatient surgery center in San Francisco. One day my friends and I headed into the Castro. I’d spent months dreaming about how my T-shirts would fit post top surgery – the way they’d lie flat across my chest, the way I’d look in the mirror. I handled dozens of T-shirts that afternoon trying to decide which one was right. Finally I settled on two. The first, a charcoal gray shirt with 2007 written across the chest and “The Castro” printed above the year; this one was to remember the significance of my trip. The second was dusty blue with the Ever-Ready battery logo on it.

We took the bus back up the steep hill to their house. I raced inside and up the stairs to my guest room and quickly unbuttoned the shirt I’d been wearing. I wasn’t supposed to raise my arms above my shoulders yet, but I found myself putting my hands through the sleeves of the dusty blue t-shirt and pulling it on, up over my head and shoulders and down across my chest. I looked in the full length double mirror. The t-shirt hugged my chest tight. I looked at the front, then the side. Either way, the Ever-Ready logo laid flat against my chest. My chest was really flat! It was almost too good to be true!

With hormone therapy and trans surgery, not only was my own shifting image healing and affirming, but the ways I began to be seen for who I am by others also heals. Being
recognized as a man in the world, being read consistently as a male, solidified my sense of self as a man. Waskul and Vannini (2006) posit a dramaturgical body that is embedded in daily social practices. From their perspective, people do not merely “have” a body; instead people actively “do” a body. Like Goffman’s (1959) self, Waskul and Vannini (2006) hold that the body is “always performed, staged, and presented: the theatre of the body are the raw materials by which the drama of our everyday embodied lives are produced” (p. 7). In that sense, the body is enacted.

In integrating the work of Goffman, they suggest substituting the word “self” for “body” in Goffman’s (1959) text as in the following quote:

The “body” does not derive from its possessor, but from the whole scene of his action… the “body” is a product of a scene that comes off and not the cause of it… If the “body” is something that people do, then it is in the doings of people – not their flesh – that the “body” is embodied; an active process by which the “body” is literally real(ized) and made meaningful. The “body” is wrought of action and interaction in situated social encounters… In communication action the “body” comes to be (Waskul and Vannini, 2006, p. 6)

This resonates as well with Prosser’s (1998) work on the body image. It is illustrated by my post top surgery vignette of my chest being flat and thus having a male body. That is what I saw when I walked down the street that day. It is what I see now when I look in the mirror and see my reflection. It is what I see when I step out of the shower each morning. I actively live and “do” my male identity day in and day out. And my maleness is integrally embodied in my body/self.

Prosser’s (1998) body image, an internal sense, is embedded in both our psyche and our material bodies. And this embodied sense of oneself as male becomes real in the “doing” of maleness. In doing male and living as men, we become male and our male body/self is literally real(ized) as suggested by Waskul and Vannini (2006). From this perspective, transgender men’s
male bodies are “wrought of action and interaction in situated social encounters” just as the
gendered bodies of all men are wrought (p.7). But for all the work I do to externalize what is
authentically embodied, there is still the fear that it will be discredited and disconfirmed. And
the need to be socially validated.

In Devor’s (1997) extensive qualitative study of trans-masculine individuals, two
overarching themes emerged: namely the fact that “each of us has a deep need to be witnessed by
others for whom we are, and each of us wants to see ourselves mirrored in others’ eyes as we see
ourselves” (p. 46). Witnesses are those persons who are not like us (thus cisgender persons) and
so they look at us with a certain distance and objectivity. When they affirm transgender men
there is some assurance that the appraisal is impartial. Mirroring occurs when we see ourselves
reflected in the eyes of others who are like us (other transgender men). Devor (2004) writes,
“each of us needs to know that people who we think are like us also see us as like them. We need
to know that we are recognized and accepted by our [transgender] peers” (pp. 46-47).

This interactive process of witnessing by cisgender people and mirroring by other
transgender people is how our sense of self is reinforced. Conversely, when the larger world’s
witness clashes with our self-perceptions, trans men experience a “profound alteration or
destruction of that self may appear to be the only option” (Devor, 2004, p. 46). Transition –
social and/or medical - enables both trans people themselves and others to see trans people as
they see themselves. As Devor (2004) points out, being witnessed is not enough; if we are never
mirrored by other trans men we feel isolated, as if we are the only one of our kind.

Waskul and Vannini (2006) draw attention to a similar dynamic in their reflections on the
“looking-glass body”. Drawing on Charles Cooley’s (1902) reflexive self in which there is no “I”
without “them,” Waskul and Vannini posit that a looking-glass body highlights our reflexivity as
part of our embodiment in the world. In this sense, I am embodied/my maleness is embodied by the ways it is reflected back to me by those around me. Another personal vignette illustrates this reflexive process.

I’m sitting in another twelve-step, recovery group in a dimly lit church basement with low ceilings in a small town on the Jersey Shore. There are about 40 people here, men and women, mostly straight with a few gay men. The group is largely working- and middle class. Most of the women are teachers and nurses; many of the younger men work in construction; the older men, a handful of dockworkers from Bayonne, are now retired by the shore.

A long table with chairs around it sits at the front of the room, with four rows of folding chairs behind the table. I sit in the second row back from the table toward the right. Looking around the room, I know almost everyone by name. I’m here early every Saturday morning listening to someone share about their recovery and how they work the twelve steps in their daily life. But this Saturday, something different is about to happen. Within the past few months, I’ve finally decided to gender transition. I’ve shared that news with numerous close friends. This coming week I’m announcing it at my job. And today, I intend to tell my Saturday morning “home” group.

As the speaker wraps up I’m distracted, thinking about what I want to say and how to say it. My heart pounds with the thought of raising my hand as the sharing from the floor begins. I’ve done this twice before in New York City where I live and work part time – once at a large meeting where no one knew me, so I calmed myself by thinking it didn’t count and/or that I was risking little. And then I shared at the lunchtime meeting I attend twice a week. My heart was pounding there too, but it was in Greenwich Village and there were lots of gay men there – not that gay men are always trans-friendly but at least I can pretty much bet they know what the word “transgender” means. Out here however, in small town Jersey, where same-sex marriage was still illegal, I had no clue what people knew and don’t know about transgender people. I find myself particularly anxious about how all the young macho construction guys are going to respond to my unanticipated declaration of masculinity.
As several people share their own stories, I think I better get my hand up or I’ll chicken out. I have to raise it three times before the speaker recognizes me. But call on me she does, and I begin to speak –

“Hi, I’m Eli (my new name) and I’m in recovery.” Ok, so now they know something is up because every other week I’ve spoken here for the past five years, I’ve used my birth assigned name, Eleanor.

“Hi, Eli,” everyone responds. I had forgotten this part. I’m startled by their response even though I’ve heard it in every meeting since I sobered up. Somehow it hadn’t occurred to me that they would immediately use my new name, in unison no less. But of course without noticeable hesitation they said my new name back to me.

Buoyed up by their affirming response, I go on – “Within the past few months I’ve decided to gender transition. I always identified as more of a guy but was too afraid to say that out loud. I worried too much about what people might think. And I’m still anxious – anxious about what you might think, anxious about how you will respond, anxious about people judging me. But I just can’t let that fear dictate my life anymore.

On our anniversary coins, it says, “To Thine Own Self Be True.” You’ve taught me over the years that if I am not true to myself, if I am not honest with myself – and with at least most of those around me – I will go back to using again. The Big Book says, “Rarely have we seen a person fail who has the capacity to be honest,” and that’s what I am trying to do here.”

When I finish, the speaker calls on the next person and the meeting goes on as if my sharing never took place. As usual there’s no “cross talk” here, no back and forth between members and me. I work as hard as I can to listen and be present for the remainder of the sharing but I wonder what will happen when the meeting ends – Who will come up and speak to me? What will they say? How awkward am I going to feel? What if no one says anything? I fantasize that the women will be supportive, even sweet. In my mind at least, they are more open to difference, less likely to be threatened by my announcement. They may not understand, but at least I think, they will be nurturing and warm.

What I’m really worried about is how the men in the room will react, how they will feel about my encroaching on their defended territory, announcing that I’m now
becoming one of them. I worry about whether they’ll take me seriously and respond angrily or, worse still, just laugh. I worry about whether they will ever see me as one of them. I try to stay present but I’m still incredibly anxious.

Finally the meeting ends with the clock striking 9:30am. As the meeting ends, we join in the customary serenity prayer together. Amen. Prayer, concluded and true to my prediction, the women in the group are warm and supportive. They hug me and thank me for sharing today. But much to my surprise and relief, man after man comes up to me and shakes my hand –

“Congratulations, Eli!” “That’s great, Eli!” “Good for you, Eli!” “Way to go, man!” Some of them slap me on the back. I wasn’t expecting all this enthusiasm. I suddenly get the feeling that they are almost welcoming me to “the [boys] club.” It’s as though they’re saying, “Glad to have you onboard, son. Glad you’ve come over to our side.”

There is a tremendous trauma in not being seen, in not being acknowledged for being who you are. But sometimes the anticipation of more trauma is worse than the reality. In this instance, the reality was so much better.

Like many trans men (and women), I endured years of this kind of real and imagined trauma. For trans men prior to transition, the trauma often centers on not being seen as a man. It is sustained by years of being called by a female name, years of female pronouns referring to you, years of being called “Ma’am” at the grocery store, years of lining up with the girls instead of with the boys in classes. It’s difficult for cisgender people to grasp the depth, breadth and developmental trajectory of extent of this trauma.

By contrast, the foregoing personal vignette describes the power of affirmation from oneself and from others—particularly other men. Who better to affirm your masculinity? Despite having had many of these affirming experiences, their reoccurrence is always welcome. It’s a continuous process. To this day, every time I step uncontested into a men’s room, I am healing
years of gender trauma. Every time someone calls me “Sir” or “Mr.” Every time I look in the mirror at myself or see a photo taken of me, I am healing years of gender trauma. Every time my ten year old daughter calls me “Daddy” or my adult son calls me “Pops.” Every time one of my buddies says, “Hey, man” or calls me “Bro.” Every time my wife runs her fingers over the hairy-ness of my chest, I am healing years of gender trauma. As I happily accumulate these affirmation experiences, they become more commonplace. And yet, each time they occur, they feel momentous.

Identity Reconstructed

“… We make ourselves up as we go along from remembered fragments… Identity making… the construction of a self-story, is always a retrospective process, a restorying, reconstructing, reweaving of experiences as they have been assigned language in the larger cultural discourse and by us” (Laird, 1999, p. 63; as cited in Hudak, 2007, p. x)

Goffman’s (1959) conception of “self” is entirely a socially constructed self. It is not a self formed in isolation within ourselves. Furthermore, it is not a static self. It is a self that is continually created and re-created in the context of our day-to-day interactions with other human beings. Like Goffman’s dramaturgical model, McAdams (2003) suggests that identity is held in the form of a story, complete with setting, scenes, characters, plot, and themes (p. 187).

As I reflect on my own early transition and listen to the stories of trans male colleagues and clients, I am frequently struck by the many ways we are re-structuring and re-creating the narratives of our lives. As psychologically integrated human beings, most of us need a coherent sense of self that hangs together and “makes sense” across our life time. In the wake of major life changes, all of us “re-story” our lives. We review the past through the lens of the present. We
reflect on our past by considering what is happening in the present. And we turn it around the other way as well. All to create a coherent story. We all do this - transgender men like all other human beings. Without a coherent identity we feel crazy/un-real/not-human.

In the above quote from Joan Laird’s (1999) book, she discusses the life stories of lesbians who come out later in life having first lived as heterosexual women. She notes that these women are faced with the task of reconstructing their identities to fit their changing lives. Many of them adopt the narrative that they have only now, in mid-life, “discovered” their “true” self, which was somehow hidden earlier on in their life journey.

Boxer and Cohler (1989) suggest we are always revising our life narratives to incorporate new evidence in an effort to make greater sense of the present moment. They describe how some lesbians upon coming out, recall early childhood experiences of being gender nonconforming (masculine) to help explain how they were really lesbians all along. In presenting qualitative data from a study on lesbians, Kath Weston (1996) says her participants remind you “that her first words were, ‘Play ball,’ but forget to tell you about the time they tried out for cheerleading or homecoming queen” (p. 44).

Similarly in a study of transgender persons (primarily trans women), Mason-Schrock (1996) describes the way the trans women called forth early childhood experiences of cross-dressing in an effort to confirm the narrative of their “true” self as female. McAdams (2003) suggests the bulk of our restorying involves selection and interpretation, not fabrication. From his perspective, we select and interpret certain memories as self-defining and accord them privileged status in our life story. We do this, he notes, in an effort to provide our lives with a sense of coherence and purpose (p. 196).
Despite the aggregation of validating self-definitional experiences, the restorying is commonly embedded in a particular cultural context at a particular moment in history. In this sense varying narratives are available to us at different moments in history and in various geographical locations (Jackson, 2001, 2007; Callero, 2003). When I first became aware of my gender difference as a young child, there was no transgender narrative available within the fundamentalist religious background in which I was raised. As I became aware of my attraction to women in adolescence the only available narrative (that I was aware of) for someone born in a female body was that of being a lesbian. I wonder now, if there had been transgender youth narratives present in the early 1970’s as there are available today, whether I might have come out as a man to myself and to others earlier in my life journey.

Waskul and Vannini (2006) use the image of a “narrative body” to discuss the interplay between our own life stories and the larger cultural discourse, as well as between institutional discourses and varying counter-narratives (p. 13). This narrative body, this embodied self, holds a set of stories about our body/selves. We are continually negotiating between our physiological body/self and the narratives of our lives. Using a similar image, Mason-Schrock (1996) suggests that “stories are like containers that hold us together; they give us a sense of coherence and continuity” (p. 176).

These stories we tell hold the possibility for healing from traumatic experiences, such as the years of gender trauma and invisibility experienced by many transgender men (Waskul & Vannini, 2006). I believe it is in this sense that trans men are continually weaving and restorying their pre- and post-transition lives together. Two personal vignettes follow which illustrate these processes. In the first one, it is if even in my dreams, I was reconstructing my life narrative to
have more coherence. In the second, a friend is grappling with her lived experience of me as a woman alongside the present reality of me as a man.

**We re-story our own narratives**

I spent my nights recovering from top surgery sleeping in the guest room at Rudd and Jerry’s house. On the wall opposite the pull-out bed is a large portrait. It’s a painting of a young man in bed with a maroon comforter pulled up to his waist. He’s bare-chested above the spread. I lay in that room the week after my surgery looking at his chest and feeling the flatness of my own new chest. Growing up in my teens and twenties, I never dreamt this could be possible.

One night, I dreamed my 16-year-old boy self was sleeping in his bed in my parent’s house. As the alarm goes off, I sleepily wake up. The light is just beginning to shine through the curtains. My all-American red, white, and blue bedroom looks just like it did the night before. I remember I have a math test that day. As I stretch and move my body, my hand brushes across my chest and to my surprise, it’s flat! Those breasts I thought were developing on my chest? They aren’t real after all. I had just been dreaming. Those years of thinking my body was becoming a woman had just been a bad dream. Now that I was awake, I could feel my chest was really flat! A feeling of profound relief washed over me. I’m so happy I begin crying.

In those first moments of waking up, it’s like this dream wipes away years of pain and anguish, years of my body not feeling right, not being shaped right, years of feeling wrong in my physical body self. My 16 year old boy self relaxes; things are ok after all; I really am a boy/young man.

**Those around us re-story our narratives**

A few years later, I’m sitting at the Starbucks at 103rd and Broadway. My ex-lesbian partner, Linda, and I are seeing each other for the first time in over a decade. It was a hard break-up after 8 years together raising her teenage daughters. We had recently
spoken for the first time since my transition and shortly thereafter decided to meet. So there we were having a cup of coffee on the corner near my apartment in the city.

Linda keeps looking at me.

“It all makes so much sense now,” she says. “This was it. This was the missing piece. You were so unhappy, so deeply unhappy. You hated your body,” she notes. “You hated shopping for bras. You only had two of them and they were always so ratty and old and stretched out. You could barely stand to be in that section of the store to look for a new one. You hated your breasts. I remember you telling me you wanted them cut off. You were so disconnected from your body.”

She paused and we were silent for a few minutes.

“It all makes sense now. You so totally were a man. That’s what it was. That’s what I was drawn to – your masculine energy – It’s what attracted me to you. You so totally were a man.”

These two personal vignettes illustrate the ways both I and the people around me were making sense of my transition, the ways that we were integrating my new visible identity as a man. As stated earlier, Goffman sees our identities, including our gender, as socially constructed. From his perspective, we are actors, always performing our sense of who we are in the company of those around us. As Goffman (1959) puts it, “A correctly staged and performed scene leads the audience to impute a self to a performed character, but this imputation – this self – is a product of a scene that comes off, and is not a cause of it” (p. 253). Our chief concern is whether our performance is credible. We expend considerable energy managing how others see and experience us because a discredited performance and its concomitant embarrassment always lurk on the horizon.

In writing about gender, Goffman (1976) brilliantly notes that many of the dynamics touted as essential differences between the sexes are actually the means through which those
very differences are produced and maintained. His thinking presaged much of Judith Butler’s work on the performance of gender when he wrote:

> What the human nature of males and females really consists of… is a capacity to learn to provide and to read depictions of masculinity and femininity and a willingness to adhere to a schedule for presenting these pictures, and this capacity they have by virtue of being persons, not females or males (Goffman, 1976, p. 8).

Several decades later, Butler (1990) described gender as performative, “a stylized repetition of acts” (p. 191). Gender is not something we have; it is something we do. For Butler, there is no “real” male or female body; only an unattainable ideal to which to aspire. In this sense, all of us – trans and cisgender alike – are in the process of attaining a “sex;” we are all striving for the effect of “realness.” Butler argues we are compelled to “do gender” in order to be recognized as human. Transgender bodies, which are not always recognizably male or female, are thus often deemed “unreal” and inhuman.

My body is generally read as “real” post transition and this is a piece of privilege I hold. Many trans women’s bodies are not read consistently as female/real and thus they do not “make sense” and live in danger of harassment and violence. My body prior to transition as a gender queer butch dyke often did not make sense and was at risk of harassment. Even today despite the privilege I hold as I go about my daily tasks, if I were to have a medical emergency and medical personnel were to find out I have female genitals, my body might not make sense and be deemed “unreal” and thus in risk of danger.

Butler grapples with the necessity of being recognized and counted as “real.” From Butler’s perspective, in the real world in which we live, bodies only make sense (and only count as bodies that matter) when sex, gender and desire cohere within a framework structured by heterosexuality (Butler, 1990). For Butler (2000), transgender people are “liminal subjects,” excluded from “the norms that govern the recognizability
of the human,” and sacrificed to maintain coherence in the category human (Halberstam, 2005). Butler (2004) concludes, “to be called unreal, and to have that call, as it were, institutionalized as a form of differential treatment, is to become the other against which the human is made” (p. 218).

In the medical lab vignette, the receptionist asks, “Well, what are you then?” Are you a man? Are you a woman? Even more basic, are you human? Can I recognize you? Are you worthy of respect and affirmation?

These are the questions trans men face daily as they navigate their identity in the world. As Goffman (1959) understands it, performing our identities and proving our humanity is a task that never ends. Sometimes our identities are contested; sometimes they are affirmed. Always they are negotiated and re-storyed.

This chapter examined navigating my identity as a man in the larger world during early transitioning. Several vignettes illustrated the way my identity is negotiated in an ongoing way. This section drew on Goffman’s (1959) belief that we are continually performing our self and West and Zimmerman’s (1987) concept of “doing gender.” The section on identities contested highlighted the messages trans men often receive about not being human and not being “real” men. Drawing on Waskul and Vannini’s (2006) and Prosser’s (1998) work, I explored the ways trans men experience the affirmation of their identities. The last section focused on some of the ways trans men reconstruct their life stories in a search for coherence.

The next chapter moves on to look at how I negotiate my identity in more intimate settings, particularly with dating partners and with my family. This chapter focused on what Goffman (1959) would call the “front stage” in human interactions. The next chapter focuses on the “back stage,” places where theoretically we are more able to relax and let down our guard.
Chapter 5: Coming Out at Home

In the first chapter I explored my coming out as transgender and beginning to navigate the outside world as a man. I discussed the ongoing ways in which trans men must navigate their identities and the various ways that identity can be contested, affirmed, and re-storied by themselves and those around them. Those stories were largely about what Goffman (1959) would call the “front stage” - that part of our lives spent in the outside world where we are performing our selves in front of various audiences.

In contrast, performing at home with my family is what Goffman (1959) would call the “back stage.” Away from the public eye, I can presumably relax and drop the performance, let my guard down, and simply “be myself.” However, Goffman argued that even back stage and at home we are all still performing our identities, albeit to a different audience, that of our intimates. Working within this framework, this chapter explores the varying ways I performed my identity on the home front with dating partners and my children while coming out.

Managing Information and Social Anxiety

In discussing stigmatized persons, Goffman (1963) distinguishes between those who are “discredited” and those who are “discreditable.” The discredited are those persons whose stigma is widely known, or visible and easily observed by those around them. The discreditable are persons whose stigma is unknown, or less apparent and generally not obvious by casual visual observation. In the current vernacular, these individuals are often referred to as “closeted” or “living in the closet” and this performance can take place at home as well as outside the home. In
In this context, Goffman might say that the “discredited” are those trans people who can easily be read as trans or gender nonconforming, or perhaps those trans persons who are widely “out” about their transgender history. In contrast, the “discreditable” are those trans persons who can pass for cisgender, those who are consistently read in their identified gender, those whose transgender history is invisible. In the context of race ethnicity, these individuals might be characterized as “passing” (Schlossberg, 2001).

In some ways my story chronicles a movement from the “discredited” to the “discreditable,” from moving through the world as a very visible gender queer butch lesbian, to living my daily life as a man whose trans history is no longer visibly apparent. Though he did not write about this population, from Goffman’s perspective, trans people who are visibly trans must constantly manage other people’s responses to their trans identity, working to lessen the anxiety others feel about their gender difference and the anxiety they feel themselves. It is in this sense that prior to my gender transition, I was constantly managing other people’s reactions to my “butch” presence in the women’s restroom, constantly worrying about what they might think or feel in my presence, and trying to head off awkward social interactions or a police appearance before it occurred. By contrast, because I am now consistently read as male, I no longer spend as much energy managing strangers’ day-to-day responses to my trans identity. It’s no longer a visible part of who I am.

It is also true since I have visibly transitioned, that others spend less energy managing their discomfort around me. My earlier visible gender queer butch presentation made people, especially strangers, anxious. Whether I rode the subway, shopped for clothes, or purchased groceries, the fact that people could not always determine whether I was male or female tended to make them anxious and uncomfortable. They moved their children away from me on the
subway; they called the police on me for using the women’s room; they questioned my right to be in the women’s dressing room when trying on clothes; they catcalled on the subway about whether I was man or a woman. Now having transitioned, they are able to more easily “put me in a gender box.” Read as a man, people appear more relaxed around me.

This ability to be read consistently as a man brings a certain level of privilege. Early on when I was dating Alexandra (now my wife), she and her five-year-old daughter, Kaj, and I went for a walk around a pond. In a short 45 minute walk, I was called “father” or “Dad” at least half a dozen times. This recognition was given to me automatically by strangers. Twenty years ago when I was butch-identified and parenting two teenagers with my lesbian partner, I was never acknowledged as a parent when we were out in public. A second Mom was not visible as a parent.

This vignette speaks to the complex intersections of gender identity, gender, and heteronormativity. It speaks to the ways a visible lesbian may be more discredited than a trans man who passes. It speaks to a level of white male privilege that assumed I was a father. As the discredited, trans people whose gender presentation is more ambiguous face more social stigma, as opposed to trans people like me who have transitioned and are read consistently as a man. The focus for more visibly gender queer trans people, like me at earlier points in my life, revolves around managing the social anxiety that “normals” have when interacting with us.

At the same time, by telling my trans-story I become transparent about my movement between being discreditable and discreditted. In many, even most, settings I am discredited because I am so open about my transgender history (such as on my professional website, in bios for speaking engagements, on the Columbia faculty website). Yet there is always some new social encounter where my history is unknown – picking up my dry cleaning, meeting a
neighbor, or networking with new colleagues. In these settings, I am always potentially discreditable.

The challenge facing the “discreditable,” or those trans persons who pass readily but not always unambiguously in their identified gender, concerns managing the information about the stigmatized identity. Energy is spent on who knows and who doesn’t know and what impact their knowing might have. A related issue of course is whether someone who knows might tell someone who doesn’t. Thus, trans men who are transparently “out” are often debating within themselves whether “to display or not to display; to tell or not to tell; to let on or not to let on; to lie or not to lie; and in each case, to whom, how, when, and where” (Goffman, 1963, p. 42). As Goffman rightly suggests, juggling all these possible scenarios generates considerable anxiety and stress for potentially discreditable trans persons whose “stigma” is not readily detectable but could be found out. Managing these two states and the movement between them consumes a tremendous amount of mental and emotional energy.

Goffman’s (1963) uses the word “passing,” to describe persons “engaged in the management of undisclosed discrediting information about self” (p. 42); Goffman notes that given the rewards in being considered normal, “almost all persons who are in a position to pass will do so on some occasion by intent” (p. 74). Indeed, they may prefer it because it takes less effort and at the same time validates their chosen social identity. In the trans community passing or not being out about one’s trans history is called “being stealth.”

Goffman suggests that passing may also occur when the disclosure of one’s stigma involves sharing more personal information than the relationship warrants, or when the stigma relates to body parts not normally visible. The former is true in many casual interactions between transgender people and others. For example, my trans history is simply irrelevant when stopping
for gasoline or purchasing a new phone or ordering take-out food. Unless, of course I need to request a key to use the men’s room. The former irrelevancy can also be true for many transgender persons given that genitals, the typical signifier of sex category and gender, are generally covered by clothing in public.

In these cases, the question of passing is about the visibility of one’s stigma. Goffman (1963) differentiates between visibility and “known-about-ness” (p. 49). The latter is often true for me, in that while my “stigma” as a trans man is rarely visible, the degree to which I am publically out as a trans man often means others know about it even though they might not be able to visually detect it. This “known-about-ness” also includes those people who knew me before I transitioned and are still in my life today.

Despite this known-about-ness, my invisibility as a trans man means that people who are new to me and do not have access to on-line or printed biographical material about me, generally are unaware of my transgender history. In these cases, I can often pass for periods of time. There is a certain anxiety involved in passing however, as I am always aware that given my stigma, I am discreditable should the information become known. At that point, individuals may feel betrayed for having not been told.

Thus there are many reasons trans men might choose to pass including:

- anxiety about the other person’s response, including possible rejection, ridicule, or even violence; fear that the information will be transmitted to others who might be rejecting or hostile;
- the fear that the other person won’t see you the same after they know you are transgender, that they won’t perceive you as a “real” man; fear that the other person will only perceive you as transgender once they know;
not wanting to have to deal with intrusive questions about your history and your physical body; fear that the other person will start scrutinizing your body for “telltale signs” you are trans/used to be a woman; fear that the other person will always be thinking about your body, that they are picturing your [naked] body/genitals in ways that feel too intrusive;

not wanting to make the other person psychologically uncomfortable;

because it doesn’t seem relevant to the task implied by the social interaction, i.e., because it seems more personal than the relationship calls for; because there doesn’t seem to be any natural way to introduce the information, i.e., that disclosing it involves more social ceremony and significance than it warrants;

because it might lead to discrimination in terms of things like housing and employment; because it might result in being excluded from something, such as a faith community or a men’s support group.

There is a real “no-win” to decisions about being out or going stealth for trans men. One the one hand many cisgender people expect trans people to be out about their trans history. They feel that trans people are deceiving them when they choose to pass. At the same time, as explored earlier trans people are often treated differently once they are out. As Goffman (1963) writes:

Thus, even while the stigmatized individual is told he is a human being like everyone else, he is being told that it would be unwise to pass or let down ’his’ group. In brief, he is told he is like anyone else and that he isn’t – although there is little agreement among spokesmen as to how much of each he should claim to be. This contradiction and joke is his fate and his destiny. (p. 124).

The following vignettes illustrate some of the struggles I experienced with decisions about passing while dating.
When I began to physically transition, I was single. Deciding whether to be out as trans while I was dating (the discredited) or come out after I began dating someone (the discreditable) was full of unexpected moments and challenges. In the beginning, I chose not to disclose my trans status/history. I wanted partners to get to know me for who I was as a man before I revealed my trans history. The following vignette illustrates some of the challenges encountered by those who are discreditable and choose to pass when possible.

I met Margaret on-line. She and I began emailing around Christmas. She was out of town, so we corresponded for several weeks before she returned to New York City. Our conversations were warm and enjoyable. We shared about our lives and experiences, our common journeys in recovery programs, and the importance of our sense of spirituality and faith. By the end of the two weeks it seemed clear we enjoyed each other. The weekend after she returned, we made plans to meet for dinner.

Two days before our first date, Margaret texted me, “Hey, Eli, do you have a last name? Or is that top secret information?”

My heart stopped. I knew if I texted her my last name, she would likely “Google” me. I am out as a trans man all over the web – from my clinical practice website, to Columbia’s faculty website, to the presentations I’ve done at conferences, to the articles I’ve published.

I picked up the phone to call her. I wanted her to hear this directly from me. Stumbling around a bit, I said, “Telling you my last name is a bit complicated.”

“My full name is Elijah Nealy. Now that I’ve told you that, my guess is we’ll hang up and you’ll Google me to find out more about me. When you do that, you’ll find out something about me that I haven’t yet shared with you which is that I’m a transgender man.”

There was silence on the other end of the phone. Dead silence. For at least thirty seconds. Then Margaret responded, “Wow. This is big. I just don’t know what to say. I’ll
have to think about this. Wow. This is really big.” She was silent again. “I really just have to think about this. I’ll call you back tomorrow.”

I spent the next day wondering what she was thinking, trying to keep my anxiety at bay. I imagined the worst – that she would no longer want to date me now that she knew I was trans.

The next day Margaret called from work on her lunch hour. “I appreciate you sharing what you did yesterday,” she said. “I don’t have anything against you. You’re good people, I’m sure. But there’s no way I could date you. It’s not that I have anything against trans people. I mean, I love your people. But I could never date you.”

A million questions raced through my head, but I didn’t really want to know the details. Knowing this much was enough. In an effort to protect what was left of my ego, I said, “Well, ok. I guess that’s it then.” We wished each other well and hung up.

I knew this was the risk I took every time I passed while dating and later came out as trans. I knew it went with the turf. But still, I felt devastated. Emailing had felt so good. How could my self-disclosure about being trans erase all that?

Goffman (1963) cites that numerous problems that can emerge in social interactions when one is passing. One possibility is that you may encounter an unanticipated need to disclose, such as when Margaret asked about my last name. It had not occurred to me that I would need to disclose before we met face-to-face. Another possibility is what Goffman (1963) calls “in-deeper-ism” - that in leaving this information out, you might be compelled to leave out other information, or actively lie, in order to prevent disclosure. Passing also opens the door to overhearing transphobic comments by others who might not make those same comments if your trans history was known to them. When some people know you are trans but you pass with others, it is often difficult to be certain about how far the information has spread and who now knows and does not know. Passing also can occasion “embarrassing exposure;” such as the example I mentioned earlier of a transgender men having a medical emergency where it becomes
known that his genitals do not match his gender presentation. Finally, as suggested above, passing leaves you open to the experience of being confronted by someone who discovers your “secret” and then accuses you of being “deceptive,” as often happens with transgender persons. The latter situation has often led to violence against transgender people.

Goffman (1963) contends that these potential problems result in the socially vulnerable person being acutely “alive to aspects of the social situation which others treat as uncalculated and unattended. What are unthinking routines for normals can become management problems for the discreditable” (p. 88). Good examples of this dynamic in the lives of transgender men include navigating gyms, locker rooms, showers, and restrooms. In each case, situations that normals navigate routinely and without much thought, provoke much attention and conscious management by trans men. Citing a source about a young boy with a urinary stricture who could not urinate in the presence of others, Goffman stated that this young man found himself “having to plot and plan and be wary, where others are merely having to be boys” (ibid). Perhaps less socially risky but more pervasive is the plight of grown men with “shy bladders” who have difficulty urinating standing beside other men in public restrooms.

In addition to engendering hyper-vigilant attention, these seemingly commonplace situations can carry great risk. As Garfinkel (1967) noted about Agnes, the transsexual woman he studied, “in instance after instance the situation to be managed can be described in general as one in which the attainment of commonplace goals and attendant satisfactions involved with it a risk of exposure” (p. 71). This risk represents a constant reality for trans men, i.e., having to “plot and plan,” the most “natural” and inconsequential social behaviors, when others are merely being men. Given the intersections of race and gender identity, this risk is even higher for trans men, and especially trans women, of color.
Furthermore, Goffman (1963) notes that these difficulties cannot always be handled based on previous experience, since “new contingencies always arise, making former concealing devices inadequate” (p. 88). Personal illustrations of this include the day I used a country-western bar men’s room only to discover that the single stall had no door on it, or leaving your “packer” behind in your girlfriend’s parent’s shower as one of my clients did (a packer is a soft penis-shaped object many trans men wear in their underwear to simulate having a penis). Given these challenges, the discreditable person, as are all transgender men who pass, find themselves constantly engaged in scanning the social landscape for potential possibilities of being inadvertently “outed,” and “often alienated from the simpler world in which those around him apparently dwell” (Goffman, 1963, p. 88).

Having navigated an array of these encounters dating without coming out about my trans history, by the time I met Alexandra (now my wife) I was determined not to field any more awkward coming out conversations. I began to routinely include my trans history in my online dating profile. I did it as matter-of-factly as I could.

Down at the bottom of the profile was a box that said, “One more thing you should know about me is…”

I typed in, “I’m a transgender man.”

Below that was a box that read, “You should message me if…”

I typed, “If you’re open to a man whose history is a little different from the average guy.”

So when Alexandra messaged me back, she already knew I was a trans man. When we talked for the first time and set up a date to meet for coffee, my trans history seemed much less relevant to her. Instead what she cared about, what was almost a “deal-breaker”, she said, was that I still smoked. Maybe, I thought, being out while dating was going to be less awkward after all, though it might mean giving up smoking.
Still early on in our dating, Alexandra confessed that she had recently Googled me, found my birth name, and then searched for an old picture of me from before I transitioned. Sure enough, she found one.

I felt incredibly exposed and vulnerable. I felt angry, betrayed and violated. Why did she do this? Why wasn’t who I am today enough? What was she looking to find? What was she trying to prove? Why couldn’t she ask me first?

As we sat there on her sofa, I felt myself shut down emotionally. I couldn’t find any words to respond to her confession. I just wanted to disappear. Even being out about my trans-ness couldn’t ward off the pain of such awkward and symbolically significant social interactions.

On the one hand, Alexandra was completely comfortable with my being a trans man. It didn’t alter her decision to date me (nor ultimately to marry me). But she still felt compelled to go looking for something. She couldn’t just take me as I was that day. Her curiosity conveyed the message that who I was, was different, and that this difference was somehow not quite normal. I couldn’t accept that curiosity as a normal expression of wanting to know someone better as when a lover would enjoy seeing baby pictures of his or her partner.

Prosser (1998) notes that while coming out is sometimes necessary (given the problems of passing identified previously), for transgender people it is an “intrinsically ambivalent act,” for in coming out and making oneself visible in the world, the transsexual frequently “undoes the realness that is the conventional goal of their transition” (p. 11). Hence self-disclosure is at the same time both potentially liberating and self-defeating.

In the foregoing vignette Alexandra knew about my trans identity/history prior to meeting me face-to-face. In that sense I was already “discredited” and no longer worried as much about managing information about my identity. Instead, my focus became managing future social interactions between us as we began to get to know one another better and more intimately.
Goffman (1963) says that those who are “normal” generally try to ignore stigma. Rather, they engage in “careful dis-attention” – for example, as many able-bodied people do when around an individual in a wheelchair (p. 41). This attempt to ignore the person’s less socially valued difference often results in interactions that are awkward and tense, or confusing for both the “normal” and the stigmatized. As “normals” occupy themselves with efforts to ignore the stigma, the discredited persons become even more focused on managing the resulting social tension.

This is typically done by “covering”- i.e., attempting to minimize the obtrusiveness of one’s stigma by emphasizing its insignificance by acting as if it were irrelevant or meaningless (Goffman, 1963, p. 102). Accordingly, Goffman notes that many people who might not try to pass, prefer to routinely cover (ibid). For the trans man, covering represents an attempt to minimize social tension created by his stigma, and thus make it easier for himself and others to “forget” his stigma and instead be more spontaneously involved in the interchange. Illustrating this, in the face of Alexandra getting upset that she had upset me, I found myself working to re-engage and move on with our conversation, as if her searching for my picture was “no big deal.” For Goffman (1963), both passing and covering are part of the “arts of impression management” (p. 130).

**To Pass or Not to Pass**

Clearly, this whole notion of being “out” versus “passing” is a complicated one for trans people. The very notion of passing implies that the transgender man is hiding a “true” identity that can be uncovered and revealed. This implies that he is not who he claims to be, and more specifically that he is “really” a woman pretending to be a man. As Bettcher (2007) notes, “in
this framework, gender presentation (attire, in particular) constitutes a gendered appearance, whereas the sexed body constitutes the hidden, sexual reality” (p. 48). Clearly, for the trans man, this perspective is problematic. In fact, for transgender men the very opposite is true. Passing means being read, or seen, for who you are: a man.

Schlossberg (2001) notes that passing calls into question the notion of authenticity itself, and in this sense highlights the performative nature of gender for all people. Garfinkel (1967) agreed with this asserting that passing is something everyone does on a daily basis. In so saying, he essentially equates passing with continually performing and reinforcing our gender claims in day-to-day interactions. In this sense, rather than an expression of inauthenticity, passing can be a source of pride for transgender men; it represents a moment in which they are seen for who they really are, in contrast to earlier experiences of invisibility and social impotence. Again, in discussing Agnes, Garfinkel defines passing as “achieving and making secure her rights to live as a normal, natural female” (p. 440). Passing can also be viewed as a form of resistance to being shamed, ridiculed, or humiliated, resistance to harassment and violence, resistance to being labeled, categorized, or “othered” in a way that is demeaning of one’s gender identity and humanity. Alternatively, Schlossberg (2001) notes that for African Americans in early American history, passing as White was the precondition for achieving and maintaining the status of being a citizen and a human being (p. 4). Hence for anyone in a socially discreditable status passing can be a passively protective and actively empowering strategy. However, it always brings with it the risk of disclosure, social rejection, personal shame, or even violence and danger.

Generally, LGBT staged identity development models posit that being “out” is essential to emotional health and well-being. Being “out” is equated with being proud of one’s gender identity and sexual preferences. To not be “out” is to be ashamed of one’s “true” self and one’s
sexual preferences. On the other hand, Goffman (1963) suggests the stigmatized individual himself can come to feel that he should be “above passing,” that if he accepts and respects himself he will feel no need to conceal his stigmatized attribute (p. 101).

Furthermore, to not be “out,” to be discreditable, is inevitably associated with ongoing stress and anxiety about who knows, who might find out, and how they will respond once they know. Coming out, being visible as a trans man, supposedly eliminates this stress. But it’s not that simple for most transgender men as these dating vignettes illustrate.

While I am out as a trans man in many areas of my life, much of the time my longing is simply to be seen as a man, as a “regular” man, as a “guy” with all that the status implies, but with no qualifiers attached. In this sense, I want to be unremarkable. From Goffman’s standpoint I want to be seen as a man without a stigma. All too often however this is not possible once my trans history is known. At the same time, there are moments when my transgender history does seem salient, times when I want to speak about the uniqueness of my journey as a man who struggled mightily in his early years socialized as a woman and heroically transcended that socialization as an adult. There are social circumstances as well, when leaving out my trans history means having to leave out other positive aspects of myself/ history unrelated to gender, and this requires a conscious “filtering” of the facts. There are times when stories I might tell about myself will not make sense unless my trans history is made known but for other reasons I prefer to leave my trans history undisclosed. In these moments, it can feel like I can never bring my whole self to an interaction, like I have to hide some aspect of myself by not being out. And hiding aspects of myself can often lead to a sense of shame.

From a trans man’s perspective, in an ideal world, being trans would be just another way of being male. It would simply be a part of who I am – like being a New York Giants football
fan, wearing glasses, being a doctoral student, or a clergyman. It would be one more piece of my history, one more aspect of myself that makes me who I am.

In my ideal world, I could be both transgender and a man. I could be a trans man, and this would not be remarkable. During World War II, it was not thought possible to be both Japanese-American and a loyal American. In post 911 America, it was/is not thought possible to be a Muslim American or an Arab American. In these contexts you were thought to be one or the other. In a just world, Muslim Americans would be viewed as every bit as American as Christian Americans or Jewish Americans. And in a just world, a trans man would be just as much a man, as every other kind of man is. Trans men, short men, tall men, bald men, White men, Black men, old men, young men. Sometimes I pass coincidentally because my trans identity is no longer visible. And sometimes I pass because I simply want to be a man in America.

It is generally assumed that passing exerts a heavy psychological price, that there is a high level of anxiety in “living a life that can be collapsed at any moment” (Goffman, 1963, p. 87). Yet, Goffman insists this is not necessarily so and writes, “where a differentness is relatively unapparent, the individual must learn that in fact he can trust himself to secrecy… starting with a feeling that everything known to himself is known to others, he often develops a realistic appreciation that this is not so” (p. 80).

Orne’s (2011) concept of “strategic outness,” mentioned earlier, illustrates the ways cisgender gay men manage their identities living both in and out of the closet. Devor’s (1997) discussion of the final stages of trans male identity development (Integration and Pride) concluded that most trans men were well integrated into society as men with their trans histories largely invisible. Yet, they did come out to those who needed to know about their history. In this
sense most of the men neither conscientiously hid nor disclosed their transgender backgrounds. Instead, disclosure was differential and strategic.

**Identity Management at Home: Stories of a Transgender Father**

We might think that identity management is limited to one’s public or semi-public life, but for the stigmatized it is often a critical component of intimate relationships as well. The first of my personal vignettes in this chapter addressed dating relationships. The sections that follow revolve around my relationships with my children as their father. Goffman (1963) notes that the possession of a discreditable secret “takes on a deeper meaning when it is not just strangers but intimates as well to whom he has not yet revealed himself” (p. 65). He goes on to suggest that it may be these intimates to whom the coming out is most difficult, threatening, or painful. It is in this context that I will discuss the management of trans information with my children.

**Parenting Unimaginable**

Markus and Nurius (1986) suggest that while an individual is free to create any combination of possible selves, the “pool of possible selves derives from the categories made salient by the individual’s particular sociocultural and historical context and from the models, images, and symbols provided by the media and by the individual’s immediate social experiences” (p. 954). Jackson (2006), speaking of the “sexual self” concurs, noting that the cultural resources we draw on in the process of making sense of ourselves are historically specific. Consequently, “particular modes of self-construction become available at different
historical moments in specific social locations” (p. 116). Callero (2003) similarly suggests that our self narratives are autobiographical stories sketched against the backdrop of particular cultural frames.

It is in this historical and ontological context that being a father was never a possibility I could imagine while I was growing up. There simply were no available narratives in the late 1960’s-1970’s, particularly within the world of the fundamentalist Baptist church within which I grew up, that would have allowed me to become a father. In a recent article on transgender-parent families, Downing (2013) notes that given such historical and cultural realities, many transgender people may not have envisioned parenting as a realistic, appropriate or even possible, option.

I recall sitting at the dining room table arguing with my father that I was never going to get married or have kids.

“No, you will,” my father argued back.

“Yes, you will,” my father argued back.

“No, I won’t. I’m never getting married. And I’m never having kids”

Back and forth the argument would go with me digging my heels in deeper every time. At some point I would give in just to end the debate.

“Well, if I have to have kids, then I’m adopting them.”

I knew even at 10 or 11 that there was no way I was getting into a wedding dress and marrying a man. And I knew pregnancy was definitely off the table. It just wasn’t going to happen.

Fortunately, available cultural narratives have changed dramatically between the early 1970’s and today. And correspondingly so has my sense and experience of family. Today there’s myself, my wife, Alexandra, our oldest daughter, Karen, our son, Alex and his partner, Caroline, and their young children, and our youngest daughter, Kaj. Karen, now 36 years old, has been in my life since she was 14 years old and Alex, 25, came to live with me four years ago. Kaj, 10
years old, was Alexandra’s daughter, to whom she gave birth and raised as a single mom for five years.

There are many variations on the experiences of transgender parents dependent on the particularities of their stories. There are the narratives of those who transitioned after they were already a parent, those who transitioned prior to becoming parents, those who transitioned from one gender to another as opposed to those who are more gender fluid/nonconforming as parents. My personal vignettes are not meant to be representative of or generalizable to all trans men who parent. They are offered instead as a window in the complexities transgender male parents have to navigate and the ways trans men are still “on stage” and performing their identities even while at home. My personal vignettes illuminate the nuances of situations I, as a trans man worry about, the information I must manage, the challenges of the conversations in which I am required to engage, even with family members and other intimately related persons who are well aware of my status and my personal history.

**Parental Vulnerability**

For both the discredited and the discreditable, there is a tremendous risk and vulnerability in performing our identities. For both, much of the vulnerability involves the real and imagined reactions of those in the audience – how they will respond to our stigmatized identities, how comfortable they will be around us or how awkward if our stigma is known, how they will react once they find out if it is unknown. This vulnerability is particularly acute for transgender men whose masculinity is often challenged as discussed in chapter one. For transgender men a key
aspect of this vulnerability involves one’s physical body/self. The vignette that follows illustrates some of the ways I, as a transgender father, experience such vulnerability.

When my partner and I first started dating, Kaj was 5 years old. Over the course of that first year, Kaj was periodically obsessed with gender difference – girls vs. boys, girls toys vs boys toys, girls clothes vs boys clothes, girls bodies vs boys bodies. Because Alexandra had been a single mom there had never been a man in the house before. One morning I was in their tiny bathroom just off the kitchen shaving in front of the sink and the mirror. My face was all lathered upped when Kaj appeared at the doorway. She stood there staring at me, completely mesmerized, watching me as I drew the razor up and down across my cheeks and chin.

Sometime later after we had all moved in together, Kaj became obsessed with how I peed. “Do you pee standing up or sitting down, Daddy?” she asked, bouncing on our bed in the early morning.

“Sometimes I sit and sometimes I stand,” I said.

“No, just now, Daddy. Did you pee sitting down or standing up?”

This went on for several days. Another time she asked me outright, “Do you have a penis?”

I wondered to myself if these were normal gender explorations about my body versus her body and her mother’s body. They had to be, right? She couldn’t possibly somehow tell that I was trans or different from other men, right? I couldn’t help but wonder.

This vignette speaks to the heightened visibility, and thus vulnerability, of my physical body/self and its social meaning. Kaj wanted to know how my body worked. She wanted to know how it was configured. She wanted to know if it was like hers and her mother’s, or if it was different. In essence, she wanted to know if I “peed” like a man or a woman. I was used to wondering in the outside world how people’s knowledge about my transgender identity/history might change how they saw me. I had often experienced outsiders asking me about my body parts, whether I had had “the surgery” (sex reassignment surgery) yet. But when I was single, my
home had been the one place I didn’t need to think or worry about these questions. It had been my sanctuary, the one place without an audience other than myself. Not so once Alexandra, Kaj, and I moved in together.

Now even my home became a place where people, my children no less, were interrogating my body/self, wondering what it looked like down there and how it worked. Wondering if my body was like other men’s bodies or if it was different? I felt an acute sense of vulnerability in this conversation with Kaj. I did not want to answer her questions about how I peed. I didn’t want to talk about my body parts with my five year old daughter. I didn’t want to talk about my history as a girl. I didn’t want to have to worry if this information would change the way she saw me, change our relationship, even change the way she experienced me as her daddy. I didn’t want to face the possibility that this knowledge might discredit me in her eyes.

**Parental Anxiety**

Alongside these particular moments of acute visibility and vulnerability, there is an ongoing and pervasive anxiety about disclosing one’s transgender history/identity to my children. Even within the confines of their home, transgender men like myself expend considerable energy managing information about their stigmatized identity. This includes questions such as: Should I disclose my identity as a trans man? How will my children find out I’m a trans man? Will someone else disclose my identity? Who should tell them? Will they still love and accept me once they know? Will they still see me as their daddy once they know? Most trans fathers I know experience considerable anxiety about these concerns.
The question of who else their children will tell also looms large. When I lived alone, it was my choice to disclose to my neighbors or friends. But once a trans man comes out to his children, he is no longer in control of this information about himself. The younger the child, the greater the possibility that they may disclose his history, even inadvertently to others outside the immediate family. These decisions about when, where, and how to come out to your children are pivotal ones, often marked by much anxiety as the following vignette indicates.

Several months into living together Alexandra, Kaj and I began attending worship services at a predominantly LGBT congregation in the city where I’ve been a member and part of the pastoral staff for years. Everyone there knows I’m trans. They knew me even years before I transitioned. When I preach there, I sometimes talk about my experiences as a trans man. So when we started attending together, I knew it was possible Kaj might hear the word transgender in conjunction with me and I wanted her to learn my history directly from me. I wanted to be able to frame the information myself. I wanted her to hear about me in a positive context. I didn’t want her to learn about transgender people in terms of stereotypes or negative images.

Instead, it happened late one afternoon in our living room after Kaj came home from school. It was a cool fall day. We had all been living together for about three months. I sat on the brown couch in front of the living room window. To the right of the couch by the front door, we had a tall dark brown bookcase. Arranged on the shelves were an assortment of framed photographs of family and friends.

Kaj, who is perpetually in motion, was bouncing around the living room talking to me. She began telling me about her baby pictures on the bookcase and about the pictures of her best friend and her mom, my wife’s best friend from Canada. As she went through the pictures one by one, she came to one of two men.

“Who’s that?” she asked me.

“That’s Rudd and Jerry, good friends of mine. That’s their wedding picture from the day they got married.”

“Two men can get married?” she asked.
“Yes, two men can get married. Sometimes boys grow up and marry other boys, sometimes girls grow up and marry other girls, and sometimes girls and boys grow up and marry each other like your mom and I are gonna do next spring.” I said.

Kaj looked puzzled.

“You know,” I added, “just like Maria has two moms.” Maria was the daughter of my wife’s coworkers and the families often got together.

Kaj nodded and said, “Oh, right.”

Suddenly I sensed this might be the moment I’d been waiting for and so I took a deep breath and leaned in to continue the conversation. I had never tried to explain what it meant to be transgender to a six year old before. My heart was pounding. I didn’t know if she would get it, if she’d think it was too weird or gross. Because she had been born through artificial insemination through an unknown donor father, I was the only Daddy she had known. I was worried about how it might change the way she saw me, if it would mean she didn’t see me as her Daddy anymore. I also didn’t know where this information would go from here. Would she announce it to her friends or teacher the next time I picked her up at school. I could just hear her voice booming out, “This is my Daddy and he used to be a girl!” Maybe she’d want to take me in for show and tell. Or maybe it would be too weird. Can a six year old make sense of a girl becoming a boy and vice versa? There was no road map for this. It felt like diving off a cliff with no bungee cord to bring me back.

“You know, sometimes kids are born in little girl bodies but they know in their hearts that they are really a little boy. And when they grow up, a doctor helps them become a boy. And sometimes a kid can be born in a little boy’s body, but know in his heart that he’s really a girl and when he grows up, a doctor helps him become a girl.”

Kaj was looking at me very intently.

“This was true for your Daddy. When I was born I was in a little girl’s body, but I knew in my heart that I was a boy. When I grew up, the doctors helped me become a man.”

I paused for a moment. I couldn’t tell what Kaj was thinking.

“Does this make sense?” I asked.
Kaj nodded. Just then, her mom came down the stairs and Kaj ran toward her, “Mommy. Mommy. I’m starving!”

The conversation was clearly over. I couldn’t tell what she had absorbed or what she made of it. I couldn’t tell if she had really understood what I was saying about me or about being transgender.

About a week later, we were sitting in the living room again. It was early one morning before school. She was on my lap on a big over-sized stuffed chair. We were jabbering about something – school, TV cartoons, picking pumpkins – when out of nowhere, Kaj proclaimed, “Some men have vaginas, don’t they, Daddy?”

I was completely taken aback, but quickly nodded yes.

“Tell me again what you said about that,” Kaj said.

So I began again to describe how some kids are born in little girl’s bodies but know in their hearts they are really a little boy, and when they grow up a doctor helps them become a boy/man.

“Is that true for Tyrone?” she asked. “Is he one of those?”

Tyrone was a 4 year old friend of hers at Sunday School who loved Barbie dolls and fairies and the color pink.

“We don’t know yet,” I replied. “Tyrone might not know yet. He might just grow up to be a boy who likes girl’s things, like girl’s clothes and toys. Or he might decide he really is a girl. But he probably won’t know till he’s older.”

That seemed to satisfy her and she headed off to the kitchen for a bowl of cereal. I still wasn’t sure what she thought of all this, but clearly she was processing my coming out conversation.

My anxiety about disclosing to Kaj is written all over this vignette – “took a deep breath, heart was pounding, never tried to explain to a 5 year old before, worried it might change the way she saw me, worried she wouldn’t see me as her Daddy anymore, would she announce it to her friends or her teacher or scream it out across the parking lot, diving off a cliff with no way back.” My daughter, Kaj, means the world to me. I love being her Daddy. And I was terrified that finding out I was transgender would somehow change all that. But I also didn’t want her to
find out from someone else. And I didn’t want her to find out in adolescence and think I’d kept it from her all those years. These complex decisions and emotions are part of the terrain of being a transgender father. And most transgender men navigate them alone in the sense that it is rare to have other transgender fathers with whom one can discuss this aspect of the journey.

This vignette also illustrates the ways transgender fathers like myself inevitably destabilize “natural” definitions of what it means to be a man or a woman. In the dominant culture men don’t have vaginas. Yet, in our transgender home, men can and do have varying female body parts. Whether trans men are “gender radicals” or not, their very existence as fathers disrupts the dominant binary gender narrative. Furthermore, the existence of transgender fathers destabilizes traditional definitions of what it means to be a “father.” In the dominant narrative, to be a father means to provide the sperm necessary to create offspring. But transgender men routinely parent children as a father without having a biological connection to those children. There is no question that each of my children sees me as their father. So clearly being a father is much more about social rather than biological relatedness. In this sense, trans men open up whole new dimensions of parenting.

Ryan (2009) argues that what trans fathers must juggle most skillfully is not how someone born female could possibly be a father. Instead, the real challenge for trans men lies in the rigid rules of gendered family life established by the dominant culture. These societal notions concerning what it means to be a father and how one goes about creating families are completely overturned by transgender fathers. Even the most gender conforming, heterosexual trans man challenges the gender binary when he becomes a father.
Parental Affirmation

Alongside of these moments of profound vulnerability, there are also moments of profound affirmation.

My son and I met each other through an agency based in Brooklyn called, You Gotta Believe! I’d seen his picture and a brief bio on the New York City website of waiting children. It was a photograph of a teenage Puerto Rican boy in a tall white chef’s hat. The bio said Alex was in culinary school and his ambition was to one day open his own restaurant. He had a great smile and there was a sense of openness in his eyes. About to turn 21, the agency had been working with Alex for over four years to find a permanent family to call his own.

Two weeks after meeting Alex over a burger together in the Bronx near Yankee stadium, I had a birthday barbeque. Alex manned the grill all afternoon, meeting my friends and colleagues. He stayed for the weekend and never left. Within weeks he was calling me “Pops.” I worried that “Pops” made me sound old, but a close friend reassured me that this was what all young, hip, urban guys called their fathers. I came out to him early on and he seemed fine with my being transgender though I sometimes wondered if he saw me any differently.

One night we were up late talking on the patio. Alex shared a lot of his story with me about growing up in foster care and spending his adolescence in a residential treatment center. At one point he teared up and said, “Pops, I’m so grateful for you. I know I’m 21 and mostly grown up, but inside sometimes I’m still a little boy. I’ve never had a man I was close to. I’m so grateful I found you, because you can teach me how to be a man.”

The emotions behind his words washed over me and tears began to form in my eyes as well. Did he really mean that this transgender guy whom some others would never see as a “real man” could teach him this? Yet I knew in that moment Alex was right – this once gender different kid who for years thought he would never grow up to be a man, let alone have a family, had finally come full circle. My son was right – I could teach him how to be a man who lived his life with courage, authenticity, and self-respect.
To that point, I had held so much anxiety about disclosing my trans identity to Alex. From the time we met, I was so worried about what this 21 year old straight Puerto Rican young man would think about my being trans. I was terrified it would mean he wouldn’t want me to be his father, terrified he would reject me. And yet, now here he was telling me that I could teach him how to be a man. Alex’s comment went straight to the core of my deepest fear and internalized shame and let the light in.

The previous chapter explored the many ways trans men’s masculinity is contested by those around us, about the ways our manhood is often called into question. And these challenges from the outside world are very real. But there is also the question of how we have internalized these messages, how we have internalized our stigma and come to anticipate rejection even when it is not forthcoming. Alex’s declaration that I could teach him how to be a man brought these dynamics to the surface for me.

It tapped into my own insecurities about being a “real” man, my own struggle to believe in the reality of my manhood, my own internal doubts about whether someone who is born in a girl’s body can really grow up to be a man as I had told Kaj. The world says it doesn’t work this way. The world says there are girls and there are boys, and the two are total opposites. I too, had internalized these beliefs and consequently faced an internal struggle to believe my manhood was credible. Touching the depth of these personal fears made me want to break down and sob when Alex said I could teach him how to be a man - sob out the pain of all the hurdles I had been forced to jump to accept my own masculine identity, the weight of all the barriers I had encountered along my journey to announce my manhood to the world, the moments I still encounter with those who would deny my manhood, and in that sense deny me my very self.
The Over-riding Salience of Parenthood

The trans literature (sparse as it is) labels my family a “transgender family,” or more broadly, an “LGBT family.” What does this mean? In what ways is our family shaped or defined by my identity as a transgender man? Is ours really a transgender family? Does my being transgender define our entire family? Sometimes it seems a better description would be to call us a “blended” family. We struggle with the things all blended families do, all those things that come with the turf when Dad and his kids come together with Mom and her kid, all the bumps and challenges of love and loyalty as a newly created family unit. Or maybe, you can call us a multi-racial family made up of White, Black, Latino and Asian members. We get far more comments in the world about being a family that doesn’t look alike than we do a transgender family.

Whatever you call us, it is true that transgender men construct families in a wide variety of ways many of which are not dependent on biological kinship relations. In this sense, trans men expand traditional notions of what it means to be a family and challenge dominant narratives that define family as blood-related. The following personal vignette illustrates the ways my adult children perceive my identity and our family.

Karen and Alex accompanied me on a business trip to Baltimore where I was giving a plenary address at a national conference of family therapists about my experiences transitioning while a therapist. We made a road trip out of it and all piled into one motel room. The morning I was scheduled to speak Alex had an asthma attack and ended up in the ER at Johns Hopkins. They put him on a nebulizer and wanted to keep him longer but he and Karen were determined not to miss my speech. They made it to the conference hotel just as I was being introduced. My talk involved a lot of personal
sharing about my own story as a trans man and my experiences coming out to my clients. Giving my talk, I felt doubly vulnerable in front of my colleagues as well as my children.

Later that day as we were walking back to our hotel, Karen and Alex asked me several detailed personal questions about being transgender – about hormones and surgeries and coming out and dating—questions they had never asked before. They were clearly feeling very proud of me and my speech and proud to be there as my children. As I answered their questions, I felt visible, vulnerable, and proud. We had never had such an in-depth and revealing conversation about my history and identity. About a block from our hotel, Alex stopped dead in his tracks and looked at me and said, “You know, Pops, I don’t think of you as a transgender. I think of you as a transformer.”

As I reflect on that interaction on the streets of downtown Baltimore, it strikes me that my transgender identity is often not the most salient aspect of my identity for my children. Their pride in me that day was so palpable. They loved being introduced to my colleagues as my son and daughter. They beamed every time someone came up to us that evening to say how powerful my address had been. During the question and answer period that followed my talk, I referenced their attendance that morning, and they both yelled out, “You rock, Dad!”

In the face of this experience there was no question that what counted most in their eyes was my relationship with them as their father. Clearly, this was the most salient aspect of my identity for them. “I don’t think of you as a transgender, Pops.” In their eyes, being a man, and especially being their father, was about much more than simply having a penis. Even Kaj at 5 years old affirmed this in her ability to embrace the notion that “some men have vaginas, don’t they, Daddy?” If they could so clearly embrace my manhood as their father, what is it that sometimes still makes it difficult for me to relax into this? What is it that can still sometimes trigger my own insecurities? My own worries about whether I am a “real” man?

The first chapter discussed hegemonic masculinity and the ways it oppresses and marginalizes not only women, but also other men. The “one complete, unblushing male”
Goffman (1963) wrote about certainly did not include transgender men. Goffman highlighted the ways all other men were marginalized by this single standard for masculinity, stating that “any male who fails to qualify in any one of these ways is likely to view himself… as unworthy, incomplete, and inferior” (128). This is the core of many trans men’s struggles. In internalizing the standards of hegemonic masculinity, trans men are fated to always come up short. In the light of this dominant narrative, trans men will never be “real” men. And when internalizing these standards, trans men are likely to view themselves as “unworthy, incomplete, and inferior.”

Goffman further notes that this shame most often arises in the presence of others, but argues that “self-hate and self-derogation can also occur when only he and the mirror are about” (p. 7).

Face to face with my children’s affirmation of me as a father and a man, what is suddenly and incontrovertibly apparent is that this uncertainty about my manhood, this persistent fear that my masculinity is being judged and found lacking is not simply about being a transgender man. The question of whether or not I am a “real” man, is a struggle many men face. Sociologist Michael Kimmel (2012) argues it is in the history of manhood in America that a man’s “true masculinity” is never settled; according to Kimmel, men – all men – must continually prove their manhood. In this sense, the transgender man’s struggle to be seen as real (or for his gender performance to be credible) is an extreme expression of what it means to be a man in the United States – and particularly a man on the margins, whether the man is cisgender or transgender, gay or straight. The struggle of trans men to be counted as “real” is the struggle of people of color and poor people and people with disabilities everywhere.

I spend vast quantities of mental and emotional energy navigating my identity as a man in this world, even with intimate others and family members. Much of this energy is devoted to managing the information about my history as a transgender man. In some situations I am
discredited before I begin because my trans status is known by those around me. In other encounters, I am potentially discreditable because my trans history is invisible and unknown to those around me.

These are the realities of my life both “out” in the world and in the home. Managing this information is filled with moments of vulnerability, anxiety, and wonderful affirmation. While Karen knew me before I transitioned, Alex and Kaj have known me only as a man. Living this life today with my family is like a dream come true for me. I love the moments when Kaj announces that I am “the best daddy ever.” My heart melts when my grown son gives me a big bear hug and says, “I love you, Pops.” I revel in the ways Karen talks with me about her life—relationships, sobriety, playing pool, applying to grad school. And I love the ways I have learned to be present for the tough conversations – our conversations about race/ethnicity, gender and class, the times I miss something, the interactions that trigger things from their past. In each of these everyday moments, my trans identity while known, is not the most salient aspect of who I am for my children. As Alex said, “I don’t see you as a transgender, Pops; I see you as a transformer.”

This chapter has focused on the ways I navigate my identity as a transgender man within more intimate relationships such as my family. It has explored the complexities of passing versus being out in these settings. When Alex speaks of me as a transformer, he is hinting at the way he sees me in the larger world – in particular the way I am in the world professionally. There, much of my work is focused on creating change for transgender children, youth, and adults and their families through my clinical work, professional trainings, and my role as a full time professor of social work. The next chapter will focus on this arena and the ways I navigate my identity as an out transgender social worker, colleague, and professor.
Chapter 6: Coming Out Professionally

I wanted to write and share some personal good news with you. I have known for a long time that my own queer story was as much about gender identity as it was about sexual orientation. This month I have begun to publicly gender transition. I am changing my legal name from Eleanor to Elijah and going by either Elijah, or more informally by Eli. I am asking friends and colleagues to begin using my new name. This also means that male pronouns are in order. In the past few weeks, I have come out to the LGBT Community Center staff, am beginning to come out to many colleagues, and presented at two professional conferences as Elijah. I am discovering that when I came out the first time, I had far fewer people in my life with whom to come out! People have been overwhelmingly supportive and these next steps have been bringing me much joy. In many ways, this transition has been a long time coming for me. I am very excited about this and hope you will share my excitement and joy. If you have any questions, please feel free to ask me. I look forward to seeing you soon. Thanks for your support.

The above email, sent out to several hundred colleagues in the early months of 2007, marked the beginnings of my coming out professionally as a transgender man. At that time I had been working in social work for over 25 years. I had held a visible position as director of adolescent and adult mental health and social services at the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Community Center in New York City for over 10 years. Given this background, I had a wide circle of colleagues throughout the New York City area. My family therapy connections and network of Metropolitan Community Churches extended throughout the United States. For me, there was no possibility of coming out quietly or slowly. Because of the physical changes involved, coming out trans is always a public endeavor. But my coming out and beginning to transition required sharing information widely.

Goffman (1963) outlines four ways the stigmatized might try to manage information about their identity. These include: concealing any signs of your stigma, dividing the world into a large group who knows nothing and a very small group who knows everything, keeping people
at a distance, or telling everyone (pp. 91-100). I chose the latter, or rather given my large circle of professional colleagues; the latter route was really the only one available to me. Telling everyone means you move from being the discreditable with information to control to being totally discredited and facing a variety of sometimes awkward social situations to manage.

In the early stages of coming out and transitioning, most trans people have no choice about being out. Transitioning involves shifting from being seen and known in one gender to living and being perceived as the opposite gender. For most trans people during transition, their body carries so much information about themselves that there’s a constant coming out process, a continual need to process and re-process other people’s reactions to the trans person’s own shifting image.

It is true since that time I could have chosen to be more discrete and guarded about disclosing my trans identity. There would always be some persons who know because they knew me prior to my transition, However, I did not have to be “out” professionally, i.e., on my website, on transgender websites, or on Columbia’s faculty web page. Being out professionally is a choice I have made. It is the way I have chosen to manage my identity.

Goffman (1963) notes that there are some within a stigmatized category who choose to become representatives of their group. They provide a “living model of fully-normal achievement, being heroes of adjustment” (p. 24-25). In many ways this is my role in my work with transgender clients and their families. I signal to the families that it is possible to be both transgender, and successful and happy. According to Goffman (1963), some individuals work actively within the stigmatized movement with a whole “new career … thrust upon him, that of representing his category” (p. 26). It is this career as a “transformer” that I want to focus on in this chapter.
Microaggressions

Representing my category has led to a host of experiences – some enriching, some challenging and some disheartening. In particular, being out on such a large scale has provoked numerous incidents that can be called “microaggressions”. The first half of this chapter discusses microaggressions, describing the kinds of microaggressions trans people experience and providing examples of how they have occurred in my professional life. The second half of the chapter will explore my responses to these microaggressions and how I have thrived professionally in spite of – or even perhaps because of – these experiences.

Microaggressions are defined as “everyday verbal, nonverbal, and environmental slights, snubs, or insults whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative messages to target persons based solely upon their marginalized group membership” (Sue, 2010, p. 3). These “hidden messages” invalidate the group identity or experiential reality of target persons, demean them on a personal level, and communicate that they are lesser human beings. They are messages that stigmatize an individual or a group. In contrast to more macro aggressive acts, microaggressions are typically unintentional, delivered by well-intentioned individuals, who are often unaware that they have engaged in harmful conduct toward a socially devalued group or individual.

These everyday occurrences may seem harmless on the surface, but Sue’s work indicates they have a powerful impact on the psychological well-being of marginalized persons and groups (Sue, 2010a; Sue, 2010b; Nadal, 2013). Sue (2010a) outlines three types of microaggressions.

The microassault is a more direct and explicit attack on a stigmatized person. It is generally conscious and intentionally meant to hurt the other person – such as name-calling,
avoidant behavior, purposeful discriminatory actions. An example of a transgender microassault would be someone calling a trans woman a “she-male.”

The microinsult includes behavioral or verbal remarks that involve rudeness and insensitivity and intentionally demean a person’s stigmatized attribute/identity. These are typically unconscious, and sometimes include subtle snubs disguised as a compliment. An example of a microinsult would be someone exclaiming over and over how they “never would have known” someone was transgender. On the one hand, they mean this as a compliment. At the same time, it carries a message that trans people stand out, are different and weird.

The microinvalidation represents verbal comments or behaviors that exclude, negate, or nullify the psychological thoughts, feelings, or experiential reality of a transgender person. This might include downplaying experiences of transphobia, denying that what occurred was transphobic, or suggesting a trans person is “too sensitive” to transphobic comments or actions.

One challenge in addressing microaggressions is that they typically contain “double messages” and can be very ambiguous. As a result the receiver often spends considerable mental and emotional energy sorting them out, many times trying to determine whether the microaggression actually occurred. Choosing to do nothing and ignoring the microaggression often has a negative impact on the marginalized person’s self esteem and sense of self; it can result in a feeling of not being true to oneself or not standing up for oneself. Yet, choosing to confront the perpetrator or raise the issues involved can also have negative consequences on the interaction with that individual. Part of the detrimental impact of microaggressions is that there often seems to be “no good way” to respond to the perpetrator.

Microaggressions and their impact have been researched in terms of race and gender, and more recently explored in regard to sexual orientation and gender identity (Sue, 2010b; Nadal,
In terms of the impact of microaggressions, Sue (2010b) writes that while all forms of racism are oppressive and harmful, what makes microaggressions “especially damaging are their continuing and cumulative nature (e.g., the daily experiences of racist hassles)” (p. 147). While they are minute events, studies have found they can “induce enormous stress and anger, ultimately generating feelings of invisibility and marginalization” (Franklin, 1999; Pierce 1988; Sue, Carodilupo, & Holder, 2008).

In a recent study of transgender persons, many participants reported experiencing anger, frustration, sadness, belittlement, and disappointment in the face of microaggressions. Participants expressed how these experiences negatively impacted their interpersonal relationships. Many described these incidents with words like “taxing” or “exhausting” indicating the emotional toll these microaggressions had on their psychological well-being (Nadal, Skolnik, & Wong, 2012). The fact that these incidents are often “small acts” does not diminish their cumulative effect and demeaning impact and power.

In studying experiences of transgender persons, Nadal developed a taxonomy of ten types of microaggressions directed toward them (Nadal, 2013; Nadal, Skolnik, & Wong, 2012). These included: the use of transphobic terminology, the endorsement of gender normative culture and behaviors, assumption of universal transgender experience, exoticization of transgender people, discomfort with or disapproval of transgender experience, assumption of sexual pathology, deviance, or abnormality, denial of the reality of transphobia, physical threat or harassment, denial of bodily privacy, and systemic microaggressions that occurred especially in areas such as public restrooms, health care, the criminal justice system, and government-issued identification.

These microaggressions often deny a transgender person’s sense of self (or identified gender), often violate the boundaries that surround most social interactions, and sometimes
literally transgress the transgender persons bodily integrity (as in cases of denial of bodily privacy). It is also true that the term “micro” aggression can imply that there is something “micro” or minor about these incidents. In this sense they might better be called “transgressions” and this is the term I will use for the remainder of this dissertation. Although one would expect fewer transgressions from social work professionals, this has not been my experience. In reviewing my time of being out professionally, several transgressions stood out as prominent examples. Four of the above types of transgressions are detailed in the following sections.

**Identity Diminished**

The use of transphobic terminology generally includes use of denigrating language toward or about transgender people. Obvious examples might include the use of the term “tranny” to refer to a transgender person, or the use of language like, “she-male,” or “he-she” in speaking to or referring to trans persons. Nadal (2013) suggests the category also includes the intentional use of the incorrect gender pronoun to refer to transgender persons. The following vignette from my professional work illustrates such an example.

Each year I guest teach a session on transgender awareness for a colleague in her undergraduate social work course. A few years ago, the department chair sat in on the class. This year after class my colleague tells me that every time the department chair speaks about me, she uses female pronouns. The information stings. This woman has only met me post-transition, only met me with facial hair and male pattern baldness, only seen me in a suit and tie, only knows me as Elijah Nealy. What reason would she have for using female pronouns?

There is a way in which hearing that she uses female pronouns to refer to me diminishes my identity. It says “You are not Elijah Nealy. You are not a man. I don’t believe you are who
you say you are. You are a woman.” There is a clear level of disrespect in the way she refuses to accept me for who I am in the world today.

The fact that she is a social work colleague, a department chair, makes the information doubly hard to take. She sat through my lecture on how to work with transgender persons, how to respect their definitions of who they are. She’s teaching social work students. What is she conveying to them about transgender people? I know I shouldn’t let this bother me, but it eats at me the next several days. I wonder why my colleague felt the need to tell me about this incident. What was her intent? How did she think I would take the information?

In a later conversation I learn that my colleague shared this information at the end of class because she is offering some illustrations to the students about what transgressions toward transgender people look like. She tells the story in hopes that the students will not repeat the same transgressions. And yet simply hearing the information makes me feel diminished. The department chair refuses to see me for who I am despite having only met me as a man. Somewhere in her mind because I once moved through the world as a woman that is the only way she can see me. Her cisgender privilege prevents her from seeing me for who I am.

In the two vignettes in chapter one about my experiences with gynecological visits, the staff refuse to see me for who I am. They insist on seeing me as a woman despite my male appearance and identity documents. For trans men even when all gender insignia line up as male, you still can’t count on people’s respect once they know you are transgender (read once were a woman). A year into transition, I ran into a colleague in Starbucks. As we were paying for our coffee, he turned to me and said, “You know, no matter how masculine you look, I’ll never see you as anything but Eleanor.”
These experiences diminish a trans person’s sense of their own humanity. Who am I if I don’t even know my own gender? For many people, their gender is a core part of who they are as a human being. This is just as true for transgender people. Bettcher writes that seeing a trans person as a “deceiver” or refusing to acknowledge their identified gender “constitutes considerable emotional violence against trans people through its impeachment of moral integrity and denials of authenticity” (p. 47).

My social work colleague apologizes profusely for how this information has impacted me. This was not her intent when she shared the information with her students but she can see how this would have felt to me. This is not an unusual story. Time after time transgender people have their identities undermined by people who refuse to see them for who they are, people who continue to use their birth assigned name, by people who continue to use their birth assigned pronouns. The fact that this happened in the context of a social work program hurts deeply.

**Identity Exoticized**

This next category of transgression occurs when transgender people are dehumanized or treated like objects. Sometimes this includes sexualizing transgender people but it can also include incidents when trans people are simply viewed as unique or bizarre – as oddities - instead of being viewed as “normal” human beings.

The following vignette illustrates one of these examples in my professional life. It was an email I received from a colleague who was planning a post-graduate professional conference.
They sought me out because they knew I was a transgender man and often presented on transgender-related topics. The email read as follows:

As we were talking about the topic for next year's forum, we decided on the following topic as a possibility:

Alternative forms of gender and sexuality: expanding our horizons

This forum will explore critical nuances of gender and sexuality. It will offer a view into alternative sexual and relationship expressions.

We thought you might have some interesting ideas, For example, one of the ideas which is very unformed was that we would have somebody from the trans-gender community speak - with a different lifestyle, with a particular family, with different sexual habits or any thing else - along with someone who would be talking about alternative sexualities (polyamory, SM issues and/or... as well as someone talking about expanding the sexual binary, perhaps from a personal point of view. We wondered whether you had any thoughts about this, particularly concerning who we might bring from the trans-gender community or what we might talk about. (I had the fantasy of bringing a "queen" who lived that life style or a cross-dresser or just a transgender person with a family....)

The tone of the email felt voyeuristic. I spent several weeks trying to process my feelings about it. The email felt like a personal affront even though I knew it wasn’t meant to be. I knew the colleague’s intentions were good. They had not meant to offend. But I did not want to be seen as an “oddity.” I did not want to suggest panelists for a voyeuristic gaze. I tried to see this for what it was – a professional interaction. This colleague had written me seeking professional advice about planning an upcoming conference. But I couldn’t escape the ways it felt personal. I couldn’t separate the two. I felt objectified. I felt as if I, as a transgender person, was being viewed as weird, as different, not normal. It feels hard enough to deal with these reactions in the “outside” world. It feels even harder to know my professional colleagues see me and other trans persons in this objectified way.
In this email transgender people are included with “alternate” sexualities. Yet there is nothing necessarily “alternative” about many transgender people. This is part of how transgender people are exoticized in this email. In the dominant culture, transgender people and alternative sexualities are often grouped together. All of us are what Judith Butler calls “liminal subjects.” As such we are deemed less worthy of respect, less human that other human beings. As cited in chapter one, Judith Butler (2004) writes that, “certain lives are not considered lives at all, they cannot be humanized… this level gives rise to a physical violence that in some sense delivers the message of dehumanization which is already at work in the culture” (p. 25). Edelman (2011) writes about the mayorally instututed and police-enforced Prostitution Free Zones in Washington, D.C. and discusses the ways in which these are about sex workers (transgender women of color) on the surface, but in reality about displacing all racially, sexed, and gendered “others” – those whom the dominant (white, middle class, heterosexual) culture does not want within close association.

I pondered how to respond. It was likely the colleague would be upset if I took offense. I felt angry about the email. I felt depressed about the email. Not responding felt like the least hassle. I didn’t know if I had it in me to explain how this email was offensive. But not responding didn’t feel good either. It felt like it was my professional duty to address this email and try to educate my colleague. Not responding felt like I was copping out. Not responding felt like I was failing in my responsibility as a “professional” transgender man, as a representative of my group. I reached out to a gay male colleague of mine who was part of the organization. He said he didn’t see how the email was problematic. I felt even more alone with the impact of this transgression. Eventually I did not respond to the colleague who wrote the email. I simply withdrew and tried to let go of the impact this email had on me.
Identity Scrutinized

This category of transgressions includes those instances in which transgender people are intensely scrutinized for signs of physical or sexual abnormality. In other instances, it can include assumptions that transgender people are deviant or aberrant. One experience I had of this transgression occurred in the context of teaching.

I’d just finished teaching week five in a semester long clinical class for second year MSW students. In this class I had shared a piece of my dissertation work in which I had come out as a transgender man. Several students stayed behind to ask questions and talk with me as class dismissed. The last student waiting for me was a white mid-life woman with children who was pursuing social work as a second career. We had just completed a four week module on oppression and mental health. She smiled warmly and thanked me for what she was learning in the course.

“It’s been so helpful covering this material,” she said. “I’m really learning a lot. I like how open you are with your own story and clinical experiences. Your stories really help me see the dynamics of racism, class, and gender at work in our client’s lives.”

“That’s great,” I said. “I’m really glad the classes have been helpful.”

She paused for a moment, and then said, “You know, I could never tell. I read your bio when I registered for the class, but I sat here through the first four classes looking at you and thinking I must have read the wrong bio. I mean you just can’t tell, you know …, that you used to be a woman. I never would have imagined it. Looking at you now, it just doesn’t seem possible.”

I smiled awkwardly.

A moment later we said goodbye and she headed out the door.

As I walked down the hall my awkwardness lingered. It’s not the first time someone has puzzled over my appearance trying to make sense that this birth-assigned female could look so much like a man. It’s as if sex and gender are such an essential part of who we are that most
people think it is impossible for someone to gender transition without leaving some tell-tale traces of their former self behind. In their minds, sex and gender are linked, interchangeable. They believe that both sex and gender are assigned at birth and cannot be changed. They also believe you can always tell if a person is transgender, that it is always visibly obvious.

Several years post transition, I ran into a colleague at my clinical office. He and I hadn’t seen each other since before I transitioned. I introduced myself to him, being sure to emphasize my last name (I did this a lot after transitioning; many people who hadn’t seen me in a while didn’t recognize me). It takes a minute but then he realizes who I am. We greet each other and talk for about ten minutes. During our brief interaction he keeps exclaiming how good I look. The tone of voice and the repeated exclamations suggest his beliefs that you can always spot a trans person by their appearance, that trans people never fully pass, that there’s no way a woman could make a man this good looking.

On the one hand, my student’s remark that she couldn’t tell, was a compliment of sorts. It was proof I “passed,” that I looked like a “real” man, that my gender performance as Goffman would put it, was credible. For this I should be happy.

At the same time, it meant my student had spent the first four weeks of the class studying my appearance and performance, searching for some chink in my gendered armor, scrutinizing me physically in what feels like an intensely personal and intrusive manner. Then, telling me about it without a hint of self-consciousness or concern for its impact. It crossed the boundaries typically erected between student and professor. I know being out as a trans man is important; I know this student needs to divest herself of the stereotypes and myths she holds about transgender people. I know this is essential to her education. This is why I continue to come out in the classroom semester after semester. It’s because I believe that visibility will change the
assumptions that students carry about transgender persons. Yet the microaggressions of this student and my male colleague still have an impact on me.

**Denial of Bodily Privacy**

This transgression appears to be somewhat unique to transgender individuals. Transgender people are often subjected to detailed, invasive questions about their bodies and body parts (typically genitals). This was evident in an earlier chapter in my vignette about coming out to a friend in a twelve step program who kept asking whether or not I had a vagina. Often transgender people are asked whether or not they have a vagina or penis, or whether they have had “the surgery” yet (meaning genital surgery). Cisgender people never get asked such personal questions about their private body parts. Yet, people often act as if they have a right to this kind of information about transgender people. It astonished me that even mental health professionals, colleagues, asked me such questions as the following vignette illustrates.

The sights and sounds were all familiar - the George Washington Bridge, Meadowlands sports complex, planes landing and taking off at Newark airport, oil refineries and cargo ship containers to the east. I’d driven the New Jersey Turnpike hundreds of times. Yet, the way my mind raced suggested this was not my ordinary drive.

The clinical conference that morning was one I had attended and presented at for several years. Most colleagues there knew me very well. The difference this year was that just three weeks earlier, I had publically announced my impending gender transition. My former name was already printed in the conference program. Consequently before I gave my address that day, I would have to announce my gender transition and new name to several hundred professional colleagues.

While I knew my colleagues respected and cared about me, it was still a tremendous amount of public self-disclosure at such an early stage of my own coming out
process. I worried about what they would think of me and how they would respond after my address. I worried whether they would take my emergent masculinity seriously. I worried whether they would use my new name, or how often they would slip back into the name by which they’d always known me. I even worried how the men I knew would react upon encountering me in the men’s room.

Most people that day were overtly supportive. Colleague after colleague greeted me after my talk. Many even congratulated me. They enthusiastically volunteered their respect for my journey and my openness about my process. In an unexpected gesture of support a gay male colleague offered to accompany me to the men’s room during the first break. I wondered to myself in that moment, how he had known my anxiety about entering this men’s-only space.

Yet in between the congratulatory handshakes and embraces, at least three colleagues asked me about whether I’d had “the surgery,” or what surgeries I planned to have – By this, they meant “the genital surgery.” Two of these individuals were people I had never met before this. Each time the question came at me I froze, not knowing quite how to respond. It seemed invasive. It was a request for more information than I wanted to give in a professional setting. They were asking for information about my body parts.

Given that these were mental health professionals, it seemed they should have had more sensitivity and known better that these were incredibly personal questions. Goffman (1963) discusses the notion that persons with a stigma often become “open persons,” individuals about whom the general public feels permission to ask incredibly personal questions. They are denied a sense of privacy about their bodies that is afforded most “normal” persons. This vignette seems to illustrate this reality.

Goffman’s (1963) work on stigma focuses on the pervasive impact of stigma on an individual’s self-concept, claiming that the daily impact of living with such stigmatization is the internalization of that stigmatized sense of self. This is what Goffman calls a “spoiled identity,” an identity that has internalized the surrounding stigma such that even if they were removed from
that stigma, it would live on within the person internally and impact the way they viewed
themselves and their world. In fact, Goffman questions whether a person can ever fully recover
from this spoiled identity. He writes:

    Where such repair is possible, what often results is not the acquisition of a fully normal
status, but a transformation of self from someone with a particular blemish into someone
with a record of having corrected a particular blemish (1963, p. 9).

Corrigan, Roe, and Tsang (2011) discuss the notion of self-stigma and mentally ill
individuals. They define the concept as the state in which a person with mental illness comes to
internalize the negative attitudes held in the larger society about mental illness and turns them
against him- or herself. They describe the profound negative effects this internalization can have
on one’s self esteem, sense of hope and sense of self-efficacy. However, they stress that self-
stigma is not the individual’s fault. It is the result of social forces, the product of the negative
beliefs and attitudes that others hold and communicate about the mentally ill.

Yet not all individuals internalize these negative myths and stereotypes. In a study of
LGBT youth, DiFulvio (2011) found that despite many experiences of being marginalized or
having violence directed at them, many youth demonstrated considerable resilience. In an early
study of gay of HIV+ gay and bisexual men, Siegel, Lune, and Meyer (1998) coined the term
“stigma resistant” to describe those men who refused to internalize the dominant culture’s
notions of HIV/AIDS. Orne (2013) suggests those who are stigma resistant are aware that they
are stigmatized and discredited, yet they remain unaffected. In essence, they hold an alternate
world view about themselves and their status- something that is often developed through their
own identity management work and the presence of a supportive community.

In reflecting on this resistance, Cooper (2013) writes that while our identities are
constrained by dominant systems and discourses, we also have “the potential to reflexively
intervene in the performance of our identities” (p. 72). He cites the example of how gay male identities are significantly constrained by hegemonic masculinity, but notes that gay men are also capable of creative and innovative agency, creating new identities or disrupting existing ones (pp. 72-73). It is in this sense that we can combat and/or surmount the stigma we encounter.

The first half of this chapter recounts numerous examples of experiencing stigma in the form of frequent transgressions. The emotions I experienced in the wake of these incidents included anger, disappointment, anxiety, shame, discouragement, and rejection. In reflecting on the frequency of these transgressions, I wondered why it is that I continue to be as “out” as I am professionally. And perhaps even more important, how is it that I thrive despite, and even because of, the recurrent experience of stigma from those around me. Despite the repeated transgressions, I do continue to show up, come out, and take risks as a transgender man. And by and large people respond to these risks – are moved by them, empowered by them in their own lives. What is it that motivates transgender men to take these risks despite the consequences? What is it that motivates the continued presentation of transgender identity in everyday life? The next section focuses on ways I transform stigma and find empowerment in my daily life.

Transforming Stigma

Visibility is Critical

As cited earlier in this study, Orne (2013) re-names coming out as “strategic outness,” and defines it as the “continual contextual management of Queer identity.” He also cites it as an “interactional accomplishment” (p. 239). He disagrees that the primary motivation for managing stigma is to avoid or mitigate hostile reactions. Instead he suggests that sometimes people
purposefully confront hostility – take it on even – to transform other people’s point of view. In essence, they wish to “wake others up” (p. 231). It is in this sense that visibility is critical. Visibility suggests coming out itself as a destigmatization strategy (Saguy & Ward, 2011).

In the days before a professional address I gave in Baltimore (attended by my young adult son and daughter) I was full of anxiety and felt extremely vulnerable anticipating my talk. I was anxious about being so open with my personal story of transition before a large audience of my colleagues and peers. I was anxious about being so open with my emotions in this story. I was afraid my talk would be merely “fascinating” to my colleagues rather than informative, that its appeal would feel voyeuristic to a largely cisgender group. As unlikely as it might seem, I was anxious about a loss of professional credibility, anxious they would see me as a “freak,” or crazy or unstable because I was transgender. I was so anxious I dreamed about it the night before we left to drive there, my dreams full of moments of vulnerability and being excessively and uncontrollably exposed.

Yet despite this anxiety, I showed up and took the risk of presenting. I showed up and took this risk because I believe that visibility is critical. My visibility allows people a window into the experience of being transgender. My visibility allows other people to make an emotional connection with me and my story. I believe making an emotional connection is often what begins to break down the wall of stigma and discrimination. My visibility allows people to make a larger human connection; it demonstrates that the things transgender people grapple with are often very human concerns.

In the wake of a class where I came out as a transgender man, I received the following email from a student that illustrates the critical importance of visibility.

Professor Nealy,

I just wanted to thank you for being real with the class and providing a generally open
atmosphere for all of us. I appreciate you especially sharing aspects of your personal life with us even the ways that you are marginalized. Last class I realized that I truly did not know what "transgender" meant and found myself confused as to why your experience of being labeled female was hurtful. I was hesitant to ask and perhaps could have in class. But I now have a better understanding after searching online I actually came across a New York organization called The Center… Thank you for a learning moment.

This kind of visibility is critical. Visibility changes those around me and visibility changes my own experience as a stigmatized individual. Corrigan, Roe, and Tsang (2011) suggest being out and visible challenges the feeling of shame that can accompany silence and often leads to receiving affirmation and support from others. Corrigan, Roe, and Tsang (2011) note that some stigmatized persons experience a “righteous anger” in the face of transgressions and stigma that enables them to transcend the internalization of these dynamics. This kind of anger transforms negative self beliefs into empowering action and visibility (Corrigan, Roe, & Tsang, 2011). Being willing to be visible empowers me to take the lead in coming out and speaking out. Similarly, Preves (2003) and others note the way stigmatized persons gain pride through political activism, autonomy, and visibility (Hahn, 1998; Sudsman, 1994; Yoshida, 1993).

**Strategic Outness**

As much as I focused on visibility in the previous section, and as much as this is a choice I have made professionally, not all trans men make this choice. Many trans men transition and go on to live their lives as men choosing not to disclose their transgender history. This practice is generally called stealth. In the clinical literature being stealth is typically portrayed as the result of shame, denial, or an immature stage of development (Hansbury, 2005; Devor, 2004).
Yet Edelman (2009) insists that the “positioning of stealth as ‘categorical denial’ is yet another mode of gross oversimplification and decontextualization of trans experience that absolutely must be problematized if the academy is to produce anything of real political, social or legal use for trans persons” (p. 164-165). Edelman goes on to suggest that stealth is better seen as a “dynamic practice of contextual disclosures and non-disclosures” (p. 165). As cited earlier, Orne (2011) uses the term “strategic outness” to acknowledge the ways one is never fully out or fully closeted. In this sense the notion of being out versus being stealth is a false dichotomy.

Given that many trans men fully pass as men, when meeting new people the assumption is generally made that you are cisgender. Sometimes sharing your trans history in those interactions (such as at the dry cleaners, the foot doctor, the local bookstore) is simply irrelevant. Sometimes trans men simply want to be seen as men, and sharing your transgender history can change all that. Goffman (1963) discusses these types of situations where we meet someone and then they become aware of our “stigma” (our transgender history). He says, in this moment in their minds we are reduced “from a whole and usual person to a tainted, discounted one” (p. 2-3). This is often true for trans men – once people know your trans history they never see you the same again, they only see your transness, or worse, they insist on seeing you as a woman. These dynamics are illustrated in several of the vignettes in this study. This alone is why many trans men, including myself, in some situations and moments, choose to be stealth.

As out as I am professionally and as strongly as I write about visibility, I am largely stealth where I live in suburban Westchester County. I am not out with our neighbors despite our regular morning dog play dates. I am not out at our 10 year old daughter’s elementary school. And I am not out at my Saturday morning men’s twelve step meeting, a setting that typically values honesty and self-disclosure. In many ways my history seems irrelevant. I am a man, What
difference does my history make? I am not ashamed of who I am. And if the information seemed particularly relevant, I would share it. And being stealth in Westchester County is a good counterpoint to how out I am in New York City. In Westchester I get to just be a man—no more wondering what I looked liked as a girl or a woman, no one scrutinizing me for tell-tale signs of femininity, no one thinking of me as less than a man. In Westchester I get to be a man among men. Being stealth in Westchester is one of the ways I navigate the transgressions experienced by being out professionally.

The assumption is often made that trans men who are stealth are never out. This is the dichotomy drawn between being out and stealth. In contrast, Edelman (2009) writes that in his study of trans men who were stealth “determining how and where to deploy and break stealth hinges directly on the setting and actors participating in the moment in question” (p. 165). In my practice, I work with a trans male college student who lives on campus. He is out to his girlfriend and one close male friend. We spent several months processing whether to come out to this male friend and when and how to do it. I had a mid-thirties trans man who was many years post transition and almost entirely stealth. He was out to no one at work or socially. But he did have two close trans male friends. I have a 15 year old trans man who is stealth at high school, but is out to a couple close friends. Many of them say they are stealth because they simply want to be a man.

Edelman (2009) writes that for one of his participants (that he calls Adam) being stealth was not a denial of the truth (as it is so often posited to be) but rather “the avoidance of unnecessary, and unwelcome, confusion” (p. 171). It was also not denial because Adam saw himself as a man. “Adam is authentically male because gender authenticity is buttressed upon the self rather than corporeality or personal history. In this sense gender authenticity is self-
determined. So when Adam chooses to be stealth. Or not disclose his trans history, he is not lying or passing, because there is nothing to lie or pass about” (p. 172).

There are also trans men for whom being stealth is essential. I worked with a railroad employee for whom being stealth was essential to be able to use the restroom without hassle or violence. There are many trans men for whom being stealth is necessary to obtaining or maintaining a job, or essential to their safety at work or in their neighborhoods, or to their ability to access competent healthcare.

Identity development models, both LGB and transgender, have typically begun with the individual in the closet and end with them coming out to themselves and others. Many times the last stage is called “Pride” and involves the individual becoming actively involved in LGBT community organizations and activism. Historically, it has contributed to negative notions about being stealth. While this is one route for some individuals, these models do not always make sense for trans persons. Edelman (2009) writes that stealth represents “trans persons who actively, and creatively, negotiate systems of power in their day-to-day lives” (p. 165). He challenges us to view stealth as “positions of resistance” (ibid).

**Empower and Validate Self**

This aspect of surviving and thriving involves a refusal to be otherized or dehumanized. Preves (2003) notes that self-definition and self-validation plays a pivotal role in rejecting the stigmatization of self. In a study of queer youth, DiFulvio (2011) found that one of the chief themes that emerged in combating stigma was affirming the self. In their work with persons living with mental illness, Corrigan, Roe, and Tsang (2011) note that personal empowerment is the antithesis of self-stigma. They state that people who have a sense of power over their illness
and more importantly, a feeling of control over their lives, are less likely to be victimized by stigma. Even though they may be aware that this kind of prejudice and discrimination continue, “empowered individuals are more able to avoid the sting of other’s ignorance” (p. 134-135). One key factor in whether or not someone experiences self-stigma lies in that individual’s personal beliefs about themselves.

Similarly, Goffman (1963) writes that not all members of a stigmatized group internalize that stigma. As he notes, it is possible “for this person to be relatively untouched by his ‘failure,’ insulated by his alienation, protected by identity beliefs of his own, he feels that he is a full-fledged normal human being, and that we are the ones who are not quite human” (p.6). In essence, Goffman says there are members of a stigmatized group that are able to “turn things around.” Rather than taking on the stigma, they view those around them as in the wrong. In essence, this individual refuses to be dehumanized. Instead, s/he develops an empowering view of self. Despite others’ views to the contrary, “His deepest feelings are his sense of being a ‘normal’ person, who therefore, deserves a fair chance and a fair break” (Goffman, 1963, p.7).

Despite the many painful experiences generated by frequent transgressions, transgender people like myself thrive when they are able to generate their own beliefs about themselves, when they can refuse to internalize the stigma that surrounds them. In a study of racial transgressions, Sue, Capodilupo, and Holder (2008) discuss the way some participants were able to view transgressions as the fault of the perpetrator, rather than internalize shame and inferiority in the wake of microaggressive events. This coping strategy empowered them and enabled them to emerge with a more validating sense of self. In writing about a study of intersexed persons, Preves (2003) notes that the ability to validate oneself plays a critical role in the movement from victim to empowerment. In writing about persons with disabilities, Charlton (1998) describes
persons with a “raised consciousness,” suggesting that these persons have developed beliefs and values that differ significantly from those of the dominant culture. In fact, this might be termed a “resistant” consciousness (p. 5).

Preves (2003) suggests that the process of destigmatizing is long and challenging. It often begins with moving beyond secrecy, isolation, and shame - which means it begins with telling one’s story to someone, even to oneself. Preves goes on to note that in reworking the story of stigmatization to one of empowerment, an individual must experience a change in consciousness – the ability to reframe one’s “personal troubles” as “political issues” (p. 87, citing Mills, 1959). It is in this sense that storytelling relocates the problem from an internal one to a more external one. This movement in the story is essential to the development of a positive self image.

Corrigan, Roe, and Tsang (2011) suggest that key to surviving stigma is to move from a personal narrative of a passive victim to that of an active agent in one’s own life, “protagonists of their stories” (p. 137). These individuals view themselves positively, draw on numerous positive self statements, and have a sense of personal agency and self-efficacy. They are actively engaged in constructing alternate meanings to their life story other than the dominant culture one of stigma, an alternate narrative than that of victim. They develop a different narrative for their lives.

Call an Ally

In the earlier vignette where I came out to a fellow twelve step member and he grilled me about whether I had a vagina, the first thing I did when I arrived home was pick up the phone and call a transgender male friend. Having people in your life who “get it” is invaluable. Having
people in your life who can validate that the transgression did occur is essential. That friend listened to my story, acknowledged the feelings of hurt and shock I was experiencing, and helped me work through those emotions by bearing witness to them. He confirmed my right to be upset yet also helped me see that my friend’s heart was in the right place. He affirmed my sense of self as a man and helped me emerge from the incident with a healthy sense of self intact.

In a study of racial microgressions, one of the primary ways participants coped was by making use of a “sanity check.” This involved using other African American friends, family members, and coworkers as a way to check out their perceptions of incidents of racism (Sue, Capodilupo, & Holder, 2008). This is what I did in the wake of that incident. It helped me maintain my sense of sanity and empowered a strong sense of self. DiFulvio (2011) notes that social connectedness is often critical to resilience. Corrigan, Roe, and Tsang (2011) suggest that interactions with peers may play a role for some persons in not internalizing negative stereotypes because the peer interactions allow for the development of positive self images. In a recent study of transgender persons and resilience, high levels of peer support emerged as a critical factor of resilience and significant ameliorated minority stressors (Bockting et al, 2013).

Preves (2003) notes the importance of social organizations. Transgender people’s involvement in these groups often leads to both an individual and collective process of destigmatization. Similarly, Saguy and Ward (2011) note the destigmatization that can often occur in the context of social movements. Surviving and thriving in the face of ongoing stigma often requires involvement in a support system.
Focus on the People who Do Get It

Goffman (1963) discusses the way stigma can isolate an individual and cut him/her off from society. However, he points out that many times the stigmatized person will encounter “sympathetic others” who are ready to “adopt his standpoint in the world and to share with him the feeling that he is human and ‘essentially’ normal in spite of appearances and in spite of his own self-doubts” (p. 20). Goffman identifies two different types of sympathetic others. The first are those who share the person’s stigma. From these individuals, the person can feel at ease and gain moral support and learn survival skills. The second group we might today call allies. Goffman defines them as normal persons whose particular life experiences have caused them to be in close contact with the stigmatized and thus become sympathetic to their needs and situation.

In keeping with Goffman’s thoughts, one survival mechanism is to focus on allies, to focus one’s social change work on those persons who can and do work to understand the life experiences of transgender persons. An alternate strategy is to focus on those persons who might come to understand. In the vignette earlier in this chapter about coming out at a professional conference and then being asked about whether I had had “The Surgery,” two of the persons who asked that question were new to me that day. One person was a colleague I knew fairly well and worked with on a periodic basis. With the first two, I engaged in a strategy of letting it go, ignoring the questions, and moving on. With the third colleague, I knew this question having been asked would continue to affect how I felt in our ongoing relationship. I also knew that their heart was in the right place and that they had not intended to offend me. From this, it seemed possible to me that it was worth a conversation with this colleague about what had transpired.
Given my belief in their ability to learn and grow, we discussed the incident; I shared my feelings about what had happened and why that question is problematic for trans people. The conversation went well and we have moved on from that point. Sometimes – even many times – people who commit transgressions can learn and grow.

In describing ways queer people respond to stigma, Orne (2013) identifies one avenue that involves standing in the path of a negative experience and absorbing the hostility directed at them. By doing so, Orne suggests they can improve future conditions for other queer people. This kind of “everyday activism” involves fielding invasive questions or being visibly out in contentious interactions. By being out in these situations, one can transform the space into one where others can be out as well. Being visibly queer can thus demonstrate as “alternate frame for queerness – that of stigma resistance” (p. 243). This kind of activism can also provide a space for non-queer people to develop a greater sense of ally-ship.

DiFulvio (2011) suggests another pathway toward resilience can involve identifying with a larger sense of purpose. In this way queer people strive to find a meaning for traumatic events and work to make sense of a marginalized identity that goes beyond themselves and their lives. This kind of meaning making may serve to lessen the effects of these micro and macro aggressions. Furthermore, moving out from oneself and into action and social change often serves to strengthen queer people’s individual identities.

These are some of the ways that this transgender man navigates the stigma that surrounds him and emerges with a strong sense of self. In a study of intersexed persons, Preves (2003) found that despite profound feelings of shame endured through numerous medical procedures, participants engaged in purposeful actions to refute negative reflected appraisals of self. Having “re-negotiated the self” in this way, it is possible that the stigma or mark remains intact to some degree, but the weight or importance of the mark becomes transformed and thus eventually holds less meaning and power over time, as long as one is able to talk
openly with others to disable the power inherent to secrecy (p. 146).

In thinking about the role of stigma in society, Goffman (1963) posits that stigma is not inherent to the individual; there is not anything inherently good or bad about the stigmatized person. Instead, stigma is a societal reaction. The attribute is not creditable, nor discreditable, in and of itself. Rather stigma functions as a mechanism of social control, or to exclude certain persons from the general mix of society. In this sense, Goffman writes, stigma involves “not so much a set of concrete individuals who can be separated into two piles, the stigmatized and the normal; instead it is a “pervasive two-role social process in which every individual participates in both roles, at least in some connections and some phases of life. The normal and the stigmatized are not persons, but rather perspectives” (p. 137). Goffman argues that stigma can only be understood within its historical and cultural context, that we have to understand how the stigma functions. The good news, he argues, is that the history of a particular stigma can regularly be changed by purposeful social action (p. 138). It is this kind of purposeful social action that led me to my choice of being out in the world as a social worker and professor.
Chapter 7: Discussion

Having been immersed until now in the construction and writing of my narrative, in the opening sections of this chapter I will try to step back and reflect on some of the possible contradictions in my story. I go on to explore the ways Goffman’s material functioned as a theoretical framework for my narrative and, more generally, discuss the challenges and the promise of autoethnography as a method for the field of social work. I review clinical implications of my findings for social work practitioners, as well as for administrators and policy makers. Building on this study, I identify future research possibilities for myself as well as for other auto-ethnographic scholars. Finally, the limitations of this study are discussed.

Contradictions in My Narrative

An innate gendered self versus the self as social construction

One of the major contradictions within my narrative is my own often innate sense of being as a man as opposed to my theoretical position of the self as a socially constructed identity. In my theoretical framework, Goffman’s (1959) *self* is an entirely socially constructed self. A self created and re-created in the context of day-to-day interactions. Goffman focuses on the ways we perform ourselves for varying audiences. Similarly, West and Zimmerman (1987) use Agnes to highlight the ways we are all always “doing gender.”

In discussing how better to understand our experience of ourselves, Jackson (2007) suggests:

A better metaphor for the self as ongoing might be a complex, many-stranded cord running through our lives, but one which does not necessarily stay the same since the
threads that comprise it can be frayed or strengthened and are continually being spliced or woven in with other threads, remade over time. So, while we have a sense of our self as continuing, that self is never unchanging. I would suggest that our ‘going on being’ derives from social experience, constructed and reconstructed through everyday social practices, rather than being lodged deep in the psyche (p. 7).

If he were alive today, my sense is that Goffman would agree.

Yet against these theories, my autoethnographic narrative largely reads as an innate and immobile sense of myself as male from childhood. These apparent contradictions are hard to reconcile. How can I be so sure of myself as a man today and not have changed in this realization over timer? Is there a way in which my own narrative is less innate and more socially constructed than I think? Did I always know I would become a man? Was I always a boy/man? These questions challenge me personally at times and emerge from the scholarly pursuit of these questions for which I have no answer. Perhaps the problem is in trying to dichotomize the answer.

Similar questions are faced by women who identify as heterosexual from early in life but later find themselves in a lesbian relationship (Laird, 1999; Hudak, 2007). How do they construct and re-construct their life stories seamlessly? How do they make sense of the changes in their lives? Were they lesbians all along – their lesbian identity innate and dormant, waiting to be discovered? Kath Weston’s (1996) ethnographic study of lesbians tells of women reaching back into their childhoods for some gendered moment that would indicate they really were a lesbian all along. Is this true for trans men? In Mason-Schrock’s (1996) study, trans men tell stories about their past that lead them to believe their transgender identity is their “true” self.

My more personally congenial story is that I always was a guy. But is that in and of itself a socially constructed narrative? Is it the narrative I have constructed in order to have a more coherent sense of myself in a very binary gendered world? Jackson (2006) notes that “particular
modes of self-construction become available at different historical moments in specific social locations” (p. 116). We don’t yet live in a gender fluid world where it is acceptable to live part of your life in one gender and then decide to live the other part as another gender—and remain a credible human being. And so I wonder if the only narrative available to most trans men is that they were always men or always trans-men?

From a cultural perspective, gender is still very much viewed as a core part of one’s being. It is still typically viewed as immutable and not something one can change. It is also viewed as binary and heterosexual. It is not perceived as fluid or shifting. In this sense, it is viewed as innate. This is the world trans people inhabit as they seek coherent and satisfying narratives for their lives.

In the context of gender clinics in the United States, in the requirements of the current DSM V, in the WPATH (2014) Standards of Care, there has historically been only one medically and socially accepted—therefore socially and politically constructed—narrative for being transgender. For the adolescent clients that sit in my office daily there is only one socially-sanctioned narrative that will allow them to begin socially transitioning. For the adults who see therapists wanting to pursue hormone therapy or transgender surgeries, there is often one narrative that will allow them to move forward. In this sense, the deeply felt sense of a gendered self may be a socially constructed narrative. I wonder whether this sense of self will be different for trans people in 2064?

Trans or not, this deeply felt sense of a gendered self is also about our own need for a sense of coherence in our life stories. It is about the ways we assign more significance to certain details from our past in order to make more sense of our present. Gagnon and Simon (1974) write that “the present significantly reshapes the past as we reconstruct our biographies to bring
them into greater coherence with our current identities, roles, situations, and available vocabularies” (p. 13). We all appear to have a need for our varied life experiences to make sense, to hold together over time. Why is that? Is that universally and historically the case? Is the alternative a sociological definition of mental illness?

Perhaps a more helpful way of conceptualizing this is to speak of an emergent self rather than an innate self. Perhaps part of what is true is that we become more aware of parts of our selves over time. My narrative does speak to this. As I moved through adolescence and became aware of my attraction to girls/women, I came out as a lesbian. But over time, this no longer fit; my masculine feelings intensified and I began to identify as a man. Perhaps it is possible to speak of an emergent masculine self, one that was in some ways present all along, but that became more insistent over time. Then as it became more possible to imagine becoming male, my need to transition emerged more fully.

I wrote earlier that in Goffman’s construction of social reality, we are constantly performing our self complete with roles, masks, and scripts. The central goal is that the performance of our self be credible. This necessitates a continually evolving and self-correcting self as the audience varies with each performance. Perhaps my self has been a more emergent self, evolving as the world and the audience shifted. A central goal in the past eight years of my life, as this narrative reveals, has been that the performance of my male self be fully credible. This would be a more Goffman sense of self, a self formed in interactions with others.

To go back to the earlier parallel with lesbians who come out later in life, the essentialist view holds that these women really were lesbians all along. Inevitably and logically, this formulation renders their prior life inauthentic. This parallels part of my struggle with an innate narrative of trans identity. It raises the question of whether I was “living a lie” before I
transitioned. But this inauthenticity seems somehow untrue. I was smart and psychologically astute; I had two master’s degrees; my lesbian partner and I raised her two teenage daughters; I was a practicing clinical social worker and a licensed therapist. How could I have been so out of touch with myself and not transition sooner? The above notion of an emergent masculine self seems to address this. But if I accept this innate narrative theory does it make my pre-transition narrative inauthentic and false? A more emergent and dynamic narrative constructed in interaction with others allows for a greater integration of self.

Still this does not entirely resolve the narratives of many trans men having a deeply felt gendered sense of themselves as male (Rubin, 2003; Vidal-Ortiz, 2002; Devor, 1997), or my own often deeply felt sense of myself as male. Post-transition I almost cannot remember a time when I was other than male. When I recall past events, I was male. When I run across the occasional childhood picture of myself, it seems impossible that this girl-child is/was me.

I imagine many cisgender people also have a deeply felt gendered sense of themselves. Indeed, this was the starting point of West and Zimmerman’s (1987) article – that most people (although they did not call them cisgender) have a deeply felt, innate sense of gender. For many of us, cisgender and transgender alike, gender is a deeply felt sense, a core part of who we are in the world. In a less binary world where gender is fluid and we imagine it on a continuum, perhaps those toward either end of the continuum might have a more deeply felt sense of their gender. And perhaps those closer to the middle of the continuum might have a more fluid sense of gender.

This need for a core and consistent sense of self that coheres over time – be it about gender, race, ethnicity – seems essential to our ability to function in the world. It appears to give our lives personal meaning. At the same time, Goffman (1959) insisted that these identities are
always socially constructed in our day-to-day interactions with others. Similarly Garfinkel (1967) argued that gender – even for transgender people - is something we do rather than something we are. From a more dualistic standpoint, Callero (2003) suggests that “the self is a joint accomplishment, neither completely determined by the social world nor pregiven at birth” (p. 121). In this sense, perhaps our identities – our core sense of self - are in part what give our lives meaning and at the same time always constructed and reconstructed in interaction with those around us and with the social context and times in which we live.

**The tension between resilience and vulnerability**

In a recent meeting with faculty and students I introduced myself as an “out transgender man.” Though “outing” myself, I was unafraid of what they would think about me or what judgments they might make about me. This moment and many others in my narrative speak to a definite resilience I have as a trans man – a certain ability to “bounce back” from encounters where others are challenging my masculinity and humanity. Indeed, the second half of the third autoethnographic chapter discusses the varied ways I have and continue to navigate these challenges.

I see this resilience every day in my clinical practice – the way a high school freshman takes on being out in his new school; the way a young trans man is negotiating his first year in college; the way a trans man early on in his transition shows up every day for work even though the job roster continues to list his birth name; the way a trans man contemplates moving back home to the South where others do not yet recognize him as a man; the trans man who resolutely
looks for a new therapist because his previous one appeared to know nothing about trans issues and denied their uniqueness.

At the same time, there is a profound vulnerability evident in my own story and in the lives of these trans men. It was apparent in the vignette when the lab clerk asks me, “Well, what are you then?” It is evident in the moment where I am being asked by my twelve-step friend about whether I have a vagina. It is apparent in the vignette about a social work department chair refusing to use male pronouns when she refers to me. By sharing these vignettes, I offer a window into my own vulnerability. Each of these vignettes represents moments where I felt exposed, wounded, or disrespected. They were moments when it felt like my masculinity and my humanity was being disregarded. But in revealing them am I revealing or contributing to my resiliency?

This is one of the contradictions in my study – the ongoing tension I feel as a trans man between these moments of tremendous resilience and other instances of profound vulnerability. As I navigate my identity in the world much of the time I feel strong and confident about who I am. Yet confronted with microaggressions like those described in this study, I can suddenly feel very vulnerable and exposed. The chapter on my experiences navigating my identity at home is full of moments of resilience and vulnerability. From my experiences in my clinical practice, this is a tension other trans men share as well. Managing this tension is a critical challenge. And yet, standing back, my telling these stories enhances my sense of resiliency.

Looking back my narrative tells the story of a very successful trans man. Additionally, I have had lots of advantages. I grew up in a middle class family that valued education. Whether chosen or not, my white race privileges me daily and gave me an advantage in education and many employment settings – though there were times my prior female gender status did not
privilege me in work settings. I tell happy stories about my children in the section on family and this is not the case for all trans people. I have a partner who embraces me for who I am. I have not been the victim of violence. There are many ways today that I experience both male privilege and heterosexual privilege – though this is not always the case as a transgender man, and was certainly not the case before when I defined myself as a “gender queer butch dyke”. But largely the narrative in this study is one of a successful and relatively privileged trans man.

However, privilege doesn’t make you immune to microaggressions. Recently I reached out to the registrar’s office to have my MSW diploma re-issued with my new legal name. I now work as full time faculty for the same institution. It’s something I have been meaning to do for years. The email I sent to the registrar’s office read:

My name is Elijah C. Nealy. I graduated from the School of Social Work in 1993. I now teach there as a full time lecturer. I am also a transgender man and graduated prior to my transition so my original diploma has my old name - Eleanor C. Nealy. I would like to find out what I need to do to have my diploma reissued with my current legal name, Elijah C. Nealy. Thank you for your assistance with this matter.
Elijah Nealy

The registrar’s response began, “Dear Eleanor,"

Clearly even being faculty member does insulate you against microaggressions. These interactions can to be profoundly hurtful and dismissive in the moment. In saying so, I wonder whether my narrative does justice to the complexities of this combination of resilience and vulnerability. This, I think, forms one of the seemingly contradictory findings of this study-- i.e., the tension between powerful resilience and profound vulnerability. I know I cannot generalize to the experiences of all trans men, but as I listen to other trans men in my clinical practice I am amazed at all the ways they transcend the personally negating experiences of oppression in their lives.
Do I want to be seen as a man or a trans man?

Goffman writes extensively about issues of *passing* or *non-passing*. The trans mens’ community often grapples with being “out” or being “stealth”. This study also looked at one trans man’s struggle to be seen as a “real” man. In my own life I am very visible and out where I teach and practice in New York City. I am more stealth where I live in suburban Westchester County. Sometimes I choose not to come out because of my sense that this will negatively change how someone sees me (no longer as a “real” man). Yet as I begin to get to know someone I often want to come out about my trans history because it allows a greater depth of connection, e.g., I am more able to talk about my life history. In the midst of all of this, the question could be asked whether I want to be seen as a man or as a trans man?

The answer is it varies depending on the situation.

I always want to be seen as a man, as in a “real” man, even if my trans history is known. I never want my trans-ness to take away from or diminish my maleness.

In this sense, I want to be seen as a “regular” guy. I want to go about my daily business like any other man. I want to be included in male conversations. I want to be seen as a father with my children. I want my male name to be respected. I want to use the men’s locker room and restroom. I want male pronouns to be used when referring to me. I want to be a husband to my partner. I want the airline attendant to call me “Sir.” I want the guy at the corner deli to call me “Bud.” I want my health insurance card to read “male.” In this sense, I like simply being seen as a man rather than as a trans man. Being a visible man is something I have wanted for many years. It also means, as Goffman would say, that I don’t need to be managing the “known-aboutness” of my stigma.
At the same time, simply being seen as a man leaves out too much of the complexity and arguably heroic struggle of whole pieces of my history and identity. While I want to be seen as a “regular” guy, in many ways I am not just your regular guy in terms of my socialization or upbringing, or in terms of my years of being part of the Queer community. The following vignette speaks to the way my identity as a transgender man intersects with issues of race/ethnicity and sexual orientation. It also represents an epiphany moment when I moved from being visibly Queer to a part of the invisible white heteronormativity.

We were on the D train headed to 36th Street in Brooklyn. It was a Saturday afternoon and the train was full but not crowded. People were talking and laughing. My girlfriend and I were talking about the day and what we had planned for that evening. We’d been dating for a couple months now and were still all caught up in discovering each other.

Across from us were two Latino men in their early thirties. My “gay-dar” told me they were one of us but they were busy talking too and I didn’t pay them much mind. The train lurched on, the public address system announcing each stop. Linda’s hand was on my knee, touching my hand. We whispered to each other and kissed.

Across from us, I saw one of the men begin to raise his arm to place it around his partner’s shoulder. Just then, he and I made eye contact and just as quickly, he defensively withdrew his arm from his partner’s shoulder.

“No, No,” I wanted to scream out. “You don’t get it. I’m one of you.” But it was too late. He had already read me for a straight white guy – read “unsafe;” read “too risky for public homo affection.”

I was horrified. He had it all wrong. I was a trans guy. I’d been Queer all my life. Couldn’t he see that? It was safe. I was safe. But should I have been pleased rather than horrified?
As I unpack this vignette, here I am on the D train, just a regular guy with my girl; what a relief to finally be a man in the world. My trans-ness is invisible. As Goffman would say, my stigma is invisible. I can relax.

But what is also at play in this vignette is that my Queerness as a trans guy is invisible too. Having spent much of my life moving through the world as a gender queer butch dyke, I was always visibly Queer. I was used to people “reading” me as part of the lesbian and gay community. I worked in LGBT organizations. My friendship circle was largely LGBT people; in fact, largely lesbians. But in this vignette because I am seen as a “regular” guy, my Queer identity and history is no longer visible. As I move through the world today, I am consistently read as straight. The first time I went to a gay and lesbian twelve-step meeting in Westchester, a gay guy asked me why I was there.

Not only is my Queer identity invisible in this vignette, but I am perceived as unsafe. Without even doing anything, suddenly I am the oppressor. This is a hard part of being a “regular” guy. Unless I wear a sign proclaiming me a trans man, when I move through the world today no one knows about my long and current involvement with the LGBT community.

I have chosen to be very open about my history in some places – my clinical practice, my teaching, certainly in this study – and in those places to risk being seen as a trans man. I have chosen to be out as a visible trans man because of the potential to educate and provide help to others. I have also chosen to be out because it allows me to feel connected to more of my history and to others who are more open to their own histories.

At the same time, at home in Westchester I spend more time fostering and protecting my identity as a “regular” guy. If asked, or if the situation seems appropriate, I will disclose my history. My hope is that even when being seen as a trans man, this does not mean I am being
seen as any less of a man. I look forward to the day when trans men are everywhere consistently seen as just men.

So the answer to the question of whether I want to be seen as a man or a trans man is another difficult one. On the one hand, it is a relief to finally be a visible man in the world. On the other hand, it is hard that this means my Queer identity is no longer visible to the world. Being out as a trans man allows my Queer connections to be more apparent, but it also means navigating the ways this can diminish my identity as a man.

Reflections on My Narrative

The “goodness of fit” between Goffman’s theory and the trans experience

One of the unexpected findings of this study was how well Goffman’s theoretical framework functioned as a tool for analysis. While Goffman wrote about gender, the experiences of transgender men was certainly not an area of study he embraced. Furthermore his work was completed in the 1960’s, now five decades ago. While I was intrigued by the promise of his work, I set into this study with much uncertainty about how much his work had to offer a study on transgender men.

Goffman’s consideration of the presentation of the self in everyday life allowed me to effectively explore the ways I navigate my identity in varying contexts. It held up in thinking about the many and varied ways a trans man’s identity is formed and re-formed in day-to-day social interaction. Likewise, Goffman’s metaphors of front stage and back stage allowed me to examine the different contexts in which I perform my identity as a man. It worked well in
thinking about the “outside” world versus time at home with my family – where as we saw, I am still performing.

In addition, his work on stigma offered a powerful lens on all the ways trans men experience prejudice within their lives. Goffman’s notion of the discredited identity was extremely useful in illuminating a trans man’s sense that once his trans history is known, others always see him differently – or never see him as a “regular” guy. The other position, the discreditable, describes powerfully the amount of mental time and energy many trans men put into managing information about their identity.

Goffman’s work effectively describes the stigmatized, the ways they manage their stigma, and the actions of those around them. However, it basically stops at these descriptions of the impact of stigma. It does not go beyond this to discuss how people thrive in the face of stigma. It minimally discusses issues of resilience, or ways the stigmatized effectively withstand the actions of those around them. The third autoethnographic chapter of this study, especially the second half of that chapter, in a sense picks up where Goffman left off. This chapter extends Goffman’s work by describing numerous ways I have tried to be resilient in the face of frequent microaggressions/stigma.

Goffman believed in the phenomenon of stigma as a societal construct. In this sense those stigmatized are not responsible for the negative beliefs society holds about them. However his focus was often more on the interpersonal and less on the societal. As Owen (2008) notes, while “Goffman clearly acknowledges that stigmatization results in power inequalities, discrimination, and lessening of life chances … he does not dwell on the power inequalities that help determine which groups are stigmatized and for what reasons” (p. 74). At the same time, as a social construct Goffman (1963) believed that prejudicial attitudes and judgments could change over
time, and that collective social action was the best remedy to alleviating stigma. Despite these limitations, Goffman’s theoretical framework is underutilized today and this study suggests that scholars should return to Goffman’s his work to inform their studies both within social work and beyond.

The challenges of autoethnography

One of the most challenging aspects of autoethnographic work is the personal vulnerability it requires of the researcher. The writing calls forth intensely personal stories - many personal details of your life - that you might not normally share with an audience of strangers who are as well academic peers. In the context of an autoethnographic dissertation, it means various forms of self-exposure to academics in positions of authority who have everything to say about one’s educational fate. This requires a kind of radical self-disclosure and vulnerability in an academic context in which your methodology and findings will be formally reviewed and critiqued on paper and in person—individually and collectively. If you are successful, it requires you to be profoundly vulnerable because the many personal details of your life will become accessible to colleagues and future students in the form of a publicly accessible document.

Writing the narrative in “scene” with actors, setting, and dialogue is more challenging than simply telling about an event that occurred. Yet this is critical as it enables the reader to enter into the experience more fully. Working to integrate these vignettes with theory in a way that broadens the knowledge base of the field is also challenging.
Perhaps most challenging for me was the data analysis phase of narrative construction. This is the very nature of autoethnography. I believe it has been much more difficult to analyze my own narrative than to engage in other forms of qualitative research where I might have had data from focus groups or interviews. This is perhaps not so much because the analysis is more difficult but because of the difficulty in bringing objectivity to what is arguably a purely subjective task. At the same time (and this speaks to the vulnerability of the work), because your colleagues and supervisors are “outsiders” they can analyze your data/narrative in ways that you cannot do as the “insider.” Successfully negotiating these conceptual, methodological and interpretive aspects of this project has profound personal as well as career implications.

**The promise of autoethnography for social work**

One value of autoethnography is that it offers a new way to share knowledge with students and practitioners. Social workers have used it to share learnings about poverty and class (Krumer-Nevo, 2009), living with depression (Gallardo, Furman, & Kulkarni, 2009), and experiences as a social work student with a disability (Pfau, 2007). In each of these prior studies, the use of personal vignettes was used to illustrate key theoretical concepts. The vignettes enabled the reader to grasp hold of the concepts in a more powerful way because of the way they are illustrated. The vignettes created an emotional connection to the concepts being applied and illuminated.

Clearly, autoethnography can be useful as a tool for drawing forth voices of those on the margins, and enabling their voices to be heard without the intermediary of an outside researcher. The vulnerability of the researcher in sharing personal vignettes has a capacity to break down
stigma, to break down the sense of those unknown to us as the “other,” and reveal a common humanity.

Another value of autoethnography is that it enables readers to gain insider knowledge - knowledge of a particular culture or group from the lens of someone within that group when the reader is not a member of the group. For those who are, it offers the possibility of validation, correction and, at the very least, self-reflection. Rather than another form of qualitative research where a researcher would interview people with a disability, or trans men of color, or Latina trans women, autoethnography brings the knowledge about that community directly from the self-interrogation and self-reflection of someone who is a member of the community. This member of the community may be able to translate certain knowledge of the community in a unique way precisely because they are an insider. Obviously, the benefits of such study are not without their costs and limitations.

Findings of this study

Clinical Themes

A repeated theme in these vignettes is that trans men are continually negotiating their identity/gender. In the narratives about gynecological visits, in the trip to the lab to give blood, in the meal with my friend who wanted to know if I had a vagina, in my dating vignettes, in the interaction with my student who thought she had read the wrong faculty bio because she couldn’t tell I used to be a woman – in each of them I was negotiating and re-negotiating my identity/gender.
Related to this is the way trans men face coming out (or the possibility of coming out or being outed) as a lifelong process. Possibly all trans men are never fully out or fully stealth. More likely, the dichotomy between being out and being stealth is a false one because all trans men are frequently making choices about disclosing or not disclosing their identity.

The vignettes I have presented reveal how much mental and emotional energy I expend navigating these dynamics. How representative of all trans men I am is hard to say. Yet, as West and Zimmerman (1987) would put it, we are all always doing gender – transgender and cisgender people alike. But for most cisgender people doing gender is something that they can typically take for granted. Their gender identity is rarely questioned in the world. It comes naturally and requires minimal thought. For trans men, doing gender requires significant thought and emotional energy. The two twelve-step stories, my coming out to my son Alex, coming out to my daughter Kaj – each of these vignettes speak to the emotional energy expended in navigating my gender identity in the world and in my home.

This emotional energy, this hyper-vigilance can continue even post-transition, even when a trans man is stealth. I recently had a hysterectomy at a large city hospital. The doctor is very trans-affirming and as are many of his staff. Prior to surgery I picked up a medical leave letter for my employment. When I went to turn it in to Human Resources, I noticed that the letter read “when she is able to return to work” and was printed on stationary that read Gynecological Surgery. While I am out at work (though not to HR), I thought about a stealth trans man and how this might negatively impact his employment situation. Doing gender, navigating our identity, demands constant attention from trans men in a way that is different for cisgender people.

The vignettes illustrate the frequent ways trans men are told they are not who they know themselves to be. This message is communicated by intimates and strangers alike. The
receptionist at the gynecological office who told me I could take the urinalysis cup to the “ladies” room, the paperwork at the gynecological department that said “female” next to my gender, the social work department chair who used female pronouns for me despite having only known me as Elijah, the workplace colleague who told me he would never see me as anything but Eleanor. Each of these vignettes communicates the message that you are not who you say you are.

Such transgressions (in both senses of the word) take a significant emotional toll on transgender people. They undermine your sense of self, of being real. For some trans people they are crazy making - this way of thinking/knowing who you are and yet consistently having your sense of “true” self denied.

I worked with a family with a six year old gender non-conforming feminine identified child. One night the child asked her mother, “Why do people keep calling me a boy? Why can’t they see I’m a girl?” Our ability to determine who we are as a human being is critical to our sense of humanity. Yet, we also need other people to acknowledge our sense of ourselves. When someone else uses our new name or our preferred pronoun, it affirms both our sense of sense and our humanity.

Related to this are the frequent ways transgender men have their masculinity called into question. In the vignette coming out to my twelve step friend the question was asked, “Are you a “real” man, Eli, or do you have a vagina?” As discussed earlier, many trans men fear that if they reveal their trans history, others will no longer see them as a “real” man. This is a powerful theme for many transgender men.

Many men on the margins have their masculinity questioned or stigmatized in different ways – African American men, gay men, differently-abled men, Asian men, Latino men.
Kimmel’s (2012) work on the history of manhood in America discusses how the intersections of hegemonic masculinity and United States history has left men of all backgrounds worried about whether they are “man enough?” In my clinical work, I have found that it can sometimes be helpful for trans men to reflect on these themes, to find a commonness with other men as opposed to feeling unique as trans men.

Similarly, in thinking about transgender fathers, the role of information management and its emotional impact on the home front is critical. Goffman is right, even back stage we are performing; we do not get to let our guard down. In the narrative about coming out to Kaj, many of my fears were about how she would respond to the information. They were about how it might impact our relationship. Would it change our relationship? Would it change the way she saw me as her “Daddy”? Other fears were about where this information might go from there. Would she tell her friends? Would she tell her teacher or the lunchroom aide? Would she ask me a question about it in a loud voice while in the grocery line? These fears caused anxiety for me both before and after telling her. This vignette offered a window into the ways trans fathers have to manage information about their identities on the home front and the vulnerability this can create.

**Implications for Administrators and Program Planners**

Create space for transgender fathers to network and support each other.

There are still few spaces for trans parents to gather and connect with each other. Most urban areas have LGBT parents groups, but these groups are typically only composed of lesbian and gay parents. The needs of trans parents, as illustrated in this study, are sometimes unique.

Trans parents face tremendous challenges in coming out to their children, whether biological or
adopted, and whether coming out as they transition or coming out post transition. With younger children coming out can be a repeated experience as children may not retain the information until older.

Trans parent networks provide a powerful source of affirmation and support, a place for trading ideas and parenting strategies, a venue for role modeling and mentoring. The vignettes in this study revealed the critical need for affirmation in the lives of trans parents as a result of living in an often transphobic world. Social workers can play key roles in initiating and supporting these networks. Administrators can provide print and online resources for trans parents. These need to recognize the wide variety of trans parents and their varying stages across the life cycle.

The needs of children growing up in trans parent-headed families are often different from those of children growing up in lesbian and gay headed households. Trans parents may be out or not out. Trans parents may form families through adoption or biologically. Children in trans families may grow up always knowing their parent is transgender; they may watch their parent go through a gender transition; or these children may have parents who were post transition when they were born and learn about their parents trans history when they are older. These are all areas where social workers can take a pivotal role, especially if done in collaboration with transgender parents themselves.

Form alliances with trans men to better educate policy makers and medical and mental health providers about the needs of trans men.

Several vignettes in this study illustrated the kind of microagressions that can be perpetrated by medical facilities and their personnel and policies. Consequently, there is a
profound need for ongoing training for both staff and administrators. It is essential to engage trans men themselves in facilitating these staff in-service sessions in ways that are empowering and collaborative. These trainings simply cannot be conceptualized and implemented by cisgender staff alone. In order for the trainings to be truly cognizant of and sensitive to the needs of trans staff and patients, transgender men (and women) must be involved in the planning, development, and implementation of the programming.

This training needs to include all staff in a facility, including front desk reception, office clerks, billing departments, facilities staff, patient transport, doctors and nurses, and medical aides. Policy development is essential as well in areas such as intake procedures and forms, adequate restroom access, appropriate identity documents, and use of preferred pronouns.

Trans welcoming agencies

Administrators need to look for creative ways to make their agencies a safe and welcoming space for transgender men. Agencies that are welcoming for lesbian and gay clients are not necessarily safe spaces for trans men. The first step is to ensure staff are educated about the needs to transgender men. Intake forms should be reviewed to ensure there are gender options other than simply male or female. It is essential to use a client’s preferred pronoun when addressing them. Whenever possible, provide gender neutral restrooms, or ensure that clients are able to use the restroom that matches their identified gender. Administrators can place trans-friendly and informative materials in the reception area and on agency walls and offices. It is helpful to actively recruit out trans staff members to work within the agency.
Implications for Policy Work

For individual trans men:

All regulations regarding identity documents should be updated to allow transgender people to obtain new documents that match their identified gender. Eliminate rules requiring sex reassignment surgery as a prerequisite to changing gender markers. This has been done in many states for driver’s licenses. It has also been done by the United States passport agency. One of the biggest remaining challenges is that regulations for changing the gender on birth certificates varies from state to state, with many states continuing to require sex reassignment surgery prior to updating gender markers. More advocacy is needed within individual states to change these policies.

Wide-ranging protections remain needed for transgender people at the federal, state, and local level. This includes transgender non-discrimination bills that protect transgender people in the workplace, housing, healthcare settings, and policies that ensure appropriate public rest room access so that trans men (and women) can use the restroom that matches their identified gender.

For transgender fathers:

Custody protections and visitations rights are needed for trans men when they are transitioning in an existing marriage. It is also essential that trans men be able to be listed as the father on the birth certificate of their children.
For transgender social workers:

Develop agency policies that protect all transgender social workers; agency policies are needed that create affirmative and supportive employment environments for transgender social workers; Ensure gender neutral bathrooms in all social work agencies; Ensure transgender-related healthcare coverage for all transgender social workers.

For transgender faculty: Ensure all social work schools have a transgender non-discrimination policy; Ensure transgender-related healthcare coverage for all social work faculty and staff; Provide transgender awareness and competence training for all faculty; Ensure support of transgender-related research projects.

**Future Research Recommendations**

Transgender fathers

More research is needed about the experiences and needs of transgender fathers across the life cycle. This includes transgender fathers who may choose to parent biologically, as well as transgender fathers who choose to adopt. It includes transgender fathers who parent before they transition, as well as transgender fathers who become parents post transition. Some research exists on coming out to their children, but more is needed on these varied experiences. In addition, research is needed on the day-to-day life experiences of transgender fathers simply navigating their life together with their families. Social workers need a greater understanding of transgender fathers’ needs for support in all of these areas.
The experiences of trans-identified social workers

Little research exists on the needs and experiences of transgender-identified social workers (Nealy, 2011). This research needs to include exploring their experiences working with clients – whether they are out or not out, and how they make these decisions. It needs to investigate their experiences teaching and training, again covering areas of whether or not they are out, and how this impacts or shapes their work. It needs to look at experiences with colleagues, how they are perceived, the kind of transgressions they experience. It needs to explore their needs for support and how this can be delivered. This research needs to focus on the strengths trans-identified social workers bring to the profession and how these can be utilized in greater ways.

Transphobia within the social work profession

Transphobia and experiences of transgressions play a major role in keeping trans men from accessing needed social work services. Research needs to be conducted on the prevalence of transphobia within the social work profession, as well as how this can be greater addressed and remediated. It needs to look at attitudes among colleagues, as well as explore the level of transgender competence among social workers across our profession.

How trans men successfully overcome stigma and frequent transgressions

Too often research on minority groups focuses on their deficits or on the stigma they experience. More research is needed that focuses on the strengths of trans men. It needs to explore the many ways trans men successfully navigate stigma and experiences of
transgressions. It needs to identify the varied ways trans men maintain a strong, positive sense of self in the face of the challenging reality of oppression. It needs to create outlets for trans men themselves to tell their stories about creating productive and meaningful lives for themselves.

Limitations of this study

Unit of Analysis

This study is limited in that the unit of analysis is one, and more specifically that this single unit of analysis is the author. While this allowed for great depth in the data studied, it limits the ways the findings of this study can be generalized. Instead, what this study tries to offer is an in-depth, nuanced view of one transgender man’s daily life. It offers a window into some of the realities other transgender men often face, though these realities may vary based on race, class, age, and ability/disability.

Scope of Study

In some ways this study offered a very narrow view of myself – that of man, father, social worker, and professor. Yet, there are many other facets that contribute to who I am as a human being. In addition this study only minimally explored my experiences of heterosexism, sexism, and male privilege – and yet these have played a significant part of my life, both prior to and post transition. I was not able to fit all these experiences into the confines of this study. They remain to be written in future documents. The vignettes were chosen to illustrate key theoretical themes. Yet other themes might have been selected that could have told a varied story. Did I
make the best choices about what encounters I have chosen to write about and what I left out? This is an aspect of the limit of this study that must be considered in evaluating it.

**Trustworthiness**

Researchers who are embedded in and a part of a community bring great insight into community experiences and challenges. At the same time, the fact that the researcher is the unit of analysis in this study does raise questions about the trustworthiness and credibility of the study findings. In the course of the data analysis, I tried to bring as much objectivity to the work of reviewing the themes that emerged in each chapter. However, given that the data came from my own life experiences, it is likely that another researcher with different life experiences might have arrived at varying conclusions. This does not necessarily deny the validity of this study. It is simply a dynamic that must be considered in reviewing the findings. This study is not meant to be representative of the life experiences of all transgender men. It is one voice to be added to the research that is emerging about the lives of trans men.

This chapter sought to explore some of contradictions of this study, offer reflections on key findings, and review implications for clinicians, administrators, and policy makers. It also suggested areas for future social work research. Finally, the limitations of this study were identified.
Chapter Eight: Conclusion

Autoethnography is about the unrelenting belief in the power of story – the power of story to change lives, the power of story to illuminate theory, the power of story to facilitate social change. I began this dissertation with the belief that my story would have something to say about the lives of other transgender men and with the belief that hearing my story might facilitate a greater understanding of trans mens’ experiences for other social workers. This is why I chose autoethnography as my method.

Plummer (1995) writes about storytelling as a “stream of social actions” and states that critical to this process is “a concern with power – with capacities to tell stories or to remain silent” (p.16). Too often people on the margins have been silent or been silenced. Telling one’s story is a critical way trans men (and women) withstand the impact of frequent transgressions (Corrigan, Roe, & Tsang, 2011). Telling stories holds power to change the way people think and feel (Corrigan, Roe, & Tsang, 2011). Telling stories can also change ourselves and our sense of the world.

Laird (1999) writes that the social category lesbian, “although invented in a context of repression and used to denigrate the feared and hated other, can also offer a sense of pride, a means to independence, and a freedom from subordinating narratives. In other words, it can offer a banner, a site for cultural resistance and social innovation” (p. 57). It is in this sense that Plummer (1995) claims that such stories “perform political tasks” (p. 17).

Being open about my story as a transgender man exposes me to frequent transgressions yet it also enables tremendous visibility. The earlier vignette about coming out at a professional conference meant fielding invasive questions, but it is also a story about allowing a whole professional community to witness my transition. This process potentially changed the ways they
will approach their transgender students and clients in the future. My visibility and openness in
the classroom potentially touches the lives of my students’ and their transgender clients. Each
time I teach or train on transgender issues, I am touching the lives not only of those in
attendance, but also those persons they will someday encounter.

By now it should be obvious to the reader that living life as a transgender man who
functions in many roles is a very complicated negotiation. There are always new situations to
navigate. If one is out and visible, then the challenge is to manage the stigma of being trans. If
one is stealth, then the Goffman task is to manage the information about one’s identity. There is
the relief of finally being a visible man. And there are the ways this erases other aspects of one’s
history and identity.

My willingness to reflect on these experiences and be visible as a transgender man has
led to a broader authenticity in my work as a social work professor and clinician. After teaching
a class about race, class, and gender, during which I shared stories from my own journey, I
received the following email from a student.

Dear Professor Nealy,
I left class yesterday wishing I had an adequate thank you, but I'm not sure I'll ever find
those words. I hope you realize just how much your openness, authenticity and
compassion mean to all of us. The talk you shared before we left was profoundly moving,
but you display and teach those same values every week. For me, and I know for a lot of
others in our section, you are setting an example I strive to emulate in my social
work practice and in my life. Thank you for trusting us with yourself and teaching us to
do the same.

It is in this sense that being open and visible creates opportunities for others to do the same.

This dissertation sought to fill a gap in social work practice knowledge about transgender
men and possibly to fill a gap in my own understanding of myself. Against the backdrop of my
experience as a clinical social worker who spends hours each week working with transgender men, I utilized the narrative methodology of autoethnography to illuminate and explicate the day-to-day lived experiences of my life as a transgender man. While this lived experience includes the phenomena of stigma, this study went beyond the effects of stigma to highlight the strengths and resiliencies required to successfully negotiate my identity in the social interactions of my day-to-day life.

Drawing on Goffman’s (1959) micro-analytic study of our day-to-day interpersonal encounters, this dissertation sought to explore three core questions: How does one trans man navigate his identity in varying relational contexts? How does he know his performance is credible to himself and others? How does his daily experience illuminate dominant discourses about gender, masculinity, and heteronormativity?

Goffman’s theoretical perspective was extremely effective as a tool for reflecting on the experiences of trans men navigating their identity in day to day social interactions. It provided a framework for looking at both front stage and back stage interactions. His work on stigma proved useful in exploring the various ways trans men manage their stigmatized identities – both when they are open about their transgender history and when they are more stealth. It is highly recommended that more social workers utilize Goffman’s work in their research practice.

This study illuminated the continuous ways trans men are navigate their identity, on a day by day basis. There are always new situations and settings in which trans men face choices about whether to disclose their transgender history. This is true whether they are out or stealth.

The study also illustrates the many ways trans men receive overt and subtle messages disallowing their identity - people insisting on seeing them as women, refusing to use male pronouns when referring to them, continuing to use their birth-assigned name, assigning me to
use the “Ladies” room for urine specimens, etc. These experiences can undermine a trans man’s sense of himself. They also require significant amounts of mental and emotional energy to surmount.

Yet in addition to experiences like these, the study also described varied and creative ways of overcoming the stigma attached to this status. In the face of oppression, new and empowering narratives can be created. Nurturing support networks can be built.

The recommendations for clinicians, administrators, and policy makers emphasized the critical role social workers can play in creating more affirming environments for transgender men. Suggestions for future research agendas offer new avenues for ensuring that clinicians and policy makers have the information needed to strengthen the profession’s ability to respond effectively to the needs of transgender men. Jensen-Hart and Williams (2010) write:

[The] benefits of autoethnography extend to educators, practitioners, researchers, students, and clients, and may be used to strengthen commonalities between these different roles. Social work practice is complex and continually changing. However, social workers may be confident in developing effective professional skills as they regularly engage in various forms of critical reflection (p. 466).

In the vignette about my son and daughter traveling with me while I made a professional presentation, my son said to me, “I don’t think of you as a transgender, Pops. I think of you as a transformer.” Trans men everywhere are transforming the stigma placed upon them by a hetero-normative binary gender worldview. The object of that transformation is both personal and societal. I hope this dissertation is a part of that endeavor.
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