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Walden University

College of Counselor Education & Supervision

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Nicholaus Erber

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Walden University
2015

Abstract

Transgender Identity Development in a Rural Area: A Multiple Case Study

of Trans-Identified People

by

Nicholaus Lee Erber

MA, Western Michigan University, 2006

BS, Michigan State University, 2001

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Counselor Education and Supervision

Walden University

January 2015

Abstract

A transgender person develops an identity over time and must overcome several obstacles such as stigma, transphobia, discrimination, and sexism, which can be even more difficult for transgender people who choose to come out and transition in a rural area. Grounded in queer theory, social constructivism, and rural identity development theory, the purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to explore the lived experiences of 4 transgender persons who came out and transitioned in a rural area, and who accessed online communities as a source of information during their identity development. A 4-stage process was used to collect data, including a semistructured interview, artifact analysis, participant observations, and an art project created by the participants. The data were loaded into the NVivo qualitative data analysis software and analyzed using coding, memoing, within-case, and cross-case analysis from the case histories of the participants. The principle findings of the study were that these transgender people living in a rural area used the Internet for both gathering information and connecting to the larger transgender community. Many other significant details provided insight into the lives of these transgender people, such as shopping for clothes, spending time in public, dealing with personal safety, and managing family and friend relationships during their transitions. These findings may inform mental health professionals about the potential identity developmental trajectory of transgender persons living in a rural area; the findings also give a voice to a population that is often hidden in rural areas.

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Dedication

This study is dedicated to the brave participants who agreed to be put under the academic microscope and reveal very private information about their lives for the greater good. These are brave souls and should be proud of their contribution to this study and the academic body of knowledge.

Acknowledgments

This study would not have been possible without the constant cheerleading and encouragement of my husband, friend, and soul mate, Christopher Michael Lapierre. Without his persistent reassurances that I would finish, this study would have been lonelier to conduct. I would like to acknowledge the sacrificed time this study, and degree overall, on spending time together, but it was well worth it.

Second, I would like to acknowledge my committee, Dr. Katherine Coule, Dr. Laura Haddock, and Dr. Stacee Reicherzer for their expertise and perseverance with my constant revisions and spontaneous decision making. All three of these women are great mentors, and I humbly honor them for walking alongside me in this process.

Lastly, but not least, I would like to acknowledge the time given up by my family at holidays and family gatherings, allowing me to read and write during family gatherings, where these things normally do not occur. They are as much a part of this study as anyone else involved.

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Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

Introduction

Transgender research is scant in the academic literature and has been limited to urban and college campus settings (Bockting, Miner, & Rosser, 2007; Crawford, 2008; Doan, 2007; Drumheller & McQuay, 2010; Eliason & Hughes, 2004; Hill, 2007; Kazyak, 2011). Hill (2007) identified the need for additional research on transgender populations in the United States. This need includes transgender people residing in rural areas. Transgender people live in rural areas; yet, most of the current research on transgender people has occurred in urban settings (Crawford, 2008; Doan, 2007, 2010; Drumheller & McQuay, 2010; Eliason & Hughes, 2004; Kazyak, 2011). Most of these scholars focused on the differences between urban settings and sometimes described the similarities or differences of urban and rural populations. Few researchers have investigated rural transgender populations; only five scholars specifically focused on transgender people living in rural areas (Bockting, Miner, & Rosser, 2007; Odo & Hawelu, 2001; Willging, Salvador, & Kano, 2006a, 2006b; Wilson, Pant, Comfort, & Ekstrand, 2011). In addition, studies that included sexual orientation (lesbian, gay and bisexual) in any combination or any single population that also included rural populations were also rare (Austin, 2013; D'Augelli, 2006; Kosciw, Greytak, & Diaz, 2009; Lee & Quam, 2013; Rowan, Giunta, Grudowski, & Anderson, 2013; Scourfield, Roen, & McDermott, 2008; Yost & Chmielewski, 2011). This dissertation contributes to the body of academic literature on transgender experiences, specifically in rural areas.

The use of pronouns in this dissertation may challenge grammar rules and style because of the gender continuum currently accepted in academic circles (Reicherzer & Anderson, 2006). The use of *they* or the third gender *hir* was used throughout the dissertation and may not refer to the plural pronoun; instead, it referred to the range of genders that exist across the gender continuum.

In this chapter, I describe the gap in the knowledge that I addressed with the present research study, and I discuss the problem statement, purpose, and research questions for the study. The theoretical foundation of the study included queer theory and social constructionist theory, and a conceptual framework was constructed using these two theories. Lastly, a brief description of the methodology, definitions, assumptions, limitations, delimitations, and significance of the study are provided at the end of the chapter.

Background

Transgender identity development has been studied in the professional literature over several decades (Beemyn, 2006; Doan, 2010; Hill, 2007; Kando, 1972); however, more recently, the topic has become more accepted in academia as a topic of research. Early researchers focused on a transgender person's ability to "pass" while living day-to-day as the opposite gender and simultaneously managing the stigma associated with being transgender (Kando, 1972). Over time, researchers such as Doan (2010) began to highlight the gender-binary system of society that acts as a barrier against transgender people to create forced-choice situations, such as presenting as male *or* female. Transgender identity development is typically nonlinear and is shaped by the unique

developmental experiences individuals have in their lives, as well as through information sought out during initial identity development stages (Argyle & Shields, 1996; Bilodeau, 2005; Bilodeau & Renn, 2005; D'Augelli, 1994, 2006; Finlon, 2002; Goldner, 2011; Morgan & Stevens, 2008; Veale, Lomax, & Clark, 2010). Navigating a gender-binary world in a nonlinear developmental trajectory can be difficult, especially during the initial stages of identity development when a person begins to question their current identity as an either or choice (Goldner, 2011).

According to the transtheoretical theory of identity development, knowledge seeking is a primary beginning stage in identity development, characterized by a person's desire to seek out and absorb as much information that can be found about a new identity (Middleton, Ergüner-Tekinalp, Williams, Stadler, & Dow, 2011). Gender-variant peoples in rural areas experience little to no exposure to transgender culture, which negatively impacts identity development in trans-identified people (D'Augelli, 2006; Drumheller & McQuay, 2010; Lynch, 2010; Palmer, Kosciw, & Bartkiewicz, 2012; Walinsky & Whitcomb, 2010; Willging et al., 2006a, 2006b; Yost & Chmielewski, 2011). The lack of information available for transgender individuals living in a rural area may diminish their identity development based on geography; however, one way for people to discover information about gender and identity is through online activity.

Scholars have recognized the role that online resources serve for transgender persons during the knowledge seeking stage of identity development (Argyle & Shields, 1996; Bilodeau, 2005; Bilodeau & Renn, 2005; D'Augelli, 2006; Finlon, 2002; Morgan & Stevens, 2008; Veale et al., 2010). Online communities can develop aspects of culture,

which are transmitted through the online environment between members (Finlon, 2002; Knopf, 2008; Rak, 2008). Online communities have been shown to develop cultures of their own within the online environment, similar to how cultures that exist outside the online environment develop. These online cultures can be a source of cultural information (Argyle & Shields, 1996; Finlon, 2002; Knopf, 2008), which may improve the amount and type of information available for this population. The types of information that can be found in online resources include discussion boards, websites, community forums, autobiographies, social media, and other e-books or e-zines (Argyle & Shields, 1996; Knopf, 2008; Rak, 2008). Autobiographies and fictional literature are another source of cultural information available through online resources (Knopf, 2008; Rak, 2008). Transgender autobiographies have been published over the past 75 years for the purpose of informing the world about the struggles and issues faced by transgender people, while other literary works were written by transgender authors to advocate for the transgender cause (Beemyn, 2006; Bryant, 2007; Butler, 2003; Davy, 2011; Peña, 2010; Raun, 2010).

Transgender people also experience multiplicity of oppression, such as the combined effects of poverty, disability, gender, and sexual orientation (Brown, 2012; Garry, 2011; Hill, 2007; Kazyak, 2011; McNeil, 2010; Olive & Thorpe, 2011; Sue, 2010). Society is changing to recognize the disenfranchisement and oppression that transgender people have experienced, and organizations are forming to initiate social change efforts (Hill, 2007). The cumulative effect of microaggressions committed against a person associated with these multiple identities can be detrimental, and the Internet can

serve a role in the life of a gender-variant person as it provides access to more positive and accepting online resources that are not common in rural areas (Argyle & Shields, 1996, Finlon, 2002; Knopf, 2008; Rak, 2008). The negative experiences of transgender people living in a rural area may be tempered if a trans-identified person seeks a connection with an online community for psychosocial support and information about transitioning as a transgender person. The Internet can provide access to information via online resources that is often inaccessible in rural areas where diversity is not supported (Argyle & Shields, 1996; Finlon, 2002; Knopf, 2008; Rak, 2008). Online resources include restricted access or invite-only online discussion boards, Facebook groups, and community forums, and they may be some of the only sources of transgender information for transgender persons who live in a rural area.

This research added to the existing body of knowledge by providing information on the understudied population of transgender people who live in rural areas. As of the date of this work, there have been no studies on the identity development process in transgender people who live in rural areas. The studies that have been conducted usually lump transgender people in with sexual orientation, which does not address the experiences of transgender people going through the process of transitioning in a very public way. This transition may be more difficult in rural areas because of a lack of diversity of people and thinking. The results of this study may be used to shed light on the unique identity development and coming out experiences of transgender people in a rural area and how online communities and resources facilitate this process. In this study, I documented the lived experiences and contexts of transgender people living in a rural

area and how online resources and connections facilitated their identity development process. The manner in which transgender people in rural areas become acculturated is believed to be through accessing online resources, and these online resources provide a necessary and essential function in transgender identity development in rural communities.

Problem Statement

Once a person begins to think they may be transgender, they begin to seek out information on the subject (Middleton et al., 2011). Such information can be found in online resources such as discussion boards, websites, online community forums, autobiographies, other e-books or e-zines (Argyle & Shields, 1996; Beemyn, 2006; Knopf, 2008; Rak, 2008). The Internet provides access to online resources in rural areas that are likely inaccessible otherwise, and where transgender diversity is not supported (Finlon, 2002; Knopf, 2008; Rak, 2008). In rural areas, online resources may be the only sources of transgender cultural information for transgender persons. Also, online communities have been shown to develop characteristics of culture, such as shared values, beliefs, and behaviors among the members of the online community (Knopf, 2008; Rak, 2008). Online resources are likely to have an impact in rural areas where information on transgender persons is mostly nonexistent.

Though a body of conceptual and empirical literature on transgender cultural and identity development exists, there is a dearth of literature on transgender persons who live in rural areas. Specifically, there is a gap in knowledge as to how transgender people in rural areas discover their identity in the absence of cultural information about what it

means to be transgender and how transgender people find cultural information once they discover their identity. The studies that do exist include gender identity with sexual orientation and do not fully appreciate the unique differences of identity development of a transgender person in a rural environment. In this multiple case study, I described the context and individual experiences of a few transgender people who resided in a rural area as they seek information through online resources (Creswell, 2009, 2013). This study filled a gap in the literature on rural transgender life; specifically how online resources inform and become part of the individual identity of a transgender person living in a rural area. This research is pertinent to mental health professionals as more gender nonconforming people are presenting to counseling (Hendricks & Testa, 2012) and the incidence of physical and sexual violence, and incidents of bullying in schools are increasing (Blosnich et al., 2013; Goldblum et al., 2012; Kretz, 2013; Robinson & Espelage, 2013).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore how the identities of transgender people develop in rural areas, where information about transgender people is scant, and how online resources facilitate this development. The multiple case study approach was used to document the multiple experiences among a few rural transgender people and how they acquired knowledge about people like themselves. Transgender people who live in rural areas develop identities through the acquisition of cultural knowledge, and the primary source of this knowledge is from online resources because of the lack of an accessible transgender community. This study shed light on the personal

experiences of transgender people in rural areas while they acquired and integrated knowledge about transgender culture into their own identities. This study may be used to inform professional counselors about the unique experiences of transgender people living in rural areas by providing insight into identity development in a vulnerable and hidden population. Additionally, transgender persons living in a rural area will have a voice where they have not had one before, and their story can inform professional counseling services they receive.

Research Questions

Include a topic sentence. Creswell (2009) and Stake (1995) explained that qualitative studies begin with one or two broad central questions followed by five to seven subquestions divided into issue and topical questions. Research questions in case study design often focus on the how or why of a phenomenon and also help begin to set the boundaries of the case (Yin, 2014). For this study, the two central questions and six additional subquestions were the foundation of the investigation. These questions were used to illuminate the process of identity development for transgender people who live in rural communities and how identity development is shaped or impacted by online resources.

Central Questions

1. How does a transgender person discover his, her, or hir identity in a rural area that lacks any obvious transgender cultural information?
2. What are the experiences a transgender person goes through in his, her, or hir search for an individual transgender identity in a rural area?

Issue Subquestions

1. How do transgender people find information on transgender culture in a rural area?
2. What value does engaging in online activity provide transgender people in rural communities?

Topical Subquestions

1. How often and what online resources do transgender people access?
2. What are some of the online resources transgender people use to learn more about themselves?
3. What are some experiences that transgender people have in the rural communities where they live?
4. What types of online interactions do transgender people engage in a rural area?

Theoretical Foundation

A theoretical foundation is inherently necessary in all research studies, particularly in qualitative studies that use inductive reasoning (Creswell, 2013; Maxwell, 2013; Miles & Huberman, 1994). Multiple case study research that is well designed has a link between theoretical propositions and approach to analysis (Maxwell, 2013; Yin, 2014). Miles and Huberman (1994) described the importance of building a theoretical foundation in qualitative research and using mind-mapping techniques to represent the linkage to the conceptual framework. This study was grounded in queer theory and social constructivism, both of which informed the conceptual framework of the study.

Queer Theory

Queer theory has been used in past studies to examine the context of sexuality in society in politics (Butler, 2003); history; sociology; women's studies; cultural studies (Creet, 2000; Maynard, 1999); advertising and business (Kates, 1999); television in pop culture (Kerry, 2009); the performing arts (Sennett & Bay-Cheng, 2002); and rural lesbian, gay, and bisexual populations (Kazyak, 2011). Queer theorists posit the fluidity of gender concept and focus on individual identity and self-determination (Brown, 2012; Garry, 2011; Hill, 2007; McNeil, 2010; Olive & Thorpe, 2011). Gender fluidity is the antithesis of gender dichotomy, which is currently how the majority of world perceives sex and gender, and explains gender in terms of falling along a continuum instead of two fixed points. Transgender issues are often political and can inflame discussions about what is and what should be regarding a person's gender in the accepted cultural processes and practices of the social environment. Fluidity of gender and the intersection of gender and other minority identities were aspects of queer theory used in this research, which are based on multiple identities within a person who experiences oppression simultaneously in various forms, such as race, sexual orientation, gender, and geography (Brown, 2012; Garry, 2011). Fluidity of gender is a part of queer theory that includes multiple genders along a continuum, including queer, cisgender, transgender, and transsexual (Garry, 2011). Queer theory is a natural fit for transgender studies because of the fluidity of identities within transgender people and the concept of flexible, self-determined gender.

These concepts were important to this study in terms of how the context of the rural environment plays a role in transgender identity development. In urban or suburban

areas, people may see advertisements and other media about transgender or lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) support groups and social networks. Transgender people in a rural area likely grow up with the typical dichotomous concept of gender and have to make changes in their beliefs about gender such that they are able to change their sex to match their gender identity. Queer theorists support the fluidity of gender in that anatomical sex is not a fixed trait, but something that is and can be changed to match individual identity through a process of self-determination.

Social Constructivism

A social constructivist paradigm was the second theoretical foundation used in this research study. According to social constructivism, an object (in this study a person) exists only after entering a social space that provides meaning and context (Keaton & Bodie, 2011). Sex and gender are explained through social constructivist theory in terms of political power and social hierarchy in which men carry social privilege over women (Carlson, 2010). Biology is an inadequate definition of sex and gender and requires social context to have meaning, and following a biological definition of male and female sex leaves out the entire transgender population that identify as something other than their biological natal sex (Choplin, 2011). Gender-role identity and differences between biological sexes have less significance in relationship seeking behaviors than previously surmised (Perrin et al., 2011). Pedagogical classroom exercises are often used in undergraduate social science classrooms that generate and analyze differences in gender based on social hierarchies and power (Berkowitz, Manohar, & Tinkler, 2010; Odhiambo, 2012). There is a significant body of literature attesting to the social

definitions of gender and how social constructivist paradigms are used to conceptualize gender in scientific studies.

The social constructivist approach in qualitative research avoids finding the true value or reality experienced by the masses and focuses instead on an egalitarian philosophy of individual meaning-making activities of the mind (Lee, 2012). A constructivist qualitative approach follows a philosophy that social structures shape and influence human behavior and only exist because of the meaning human beings place on the phenomenon (Creswell, 2009; Hays & Wood, 2011; Rudestam & Newton, 2007). In the present study, social constructivism was used to explain how a transgender person in a rural area changed their ideas that gender is fixed and begins to self-identify and alter their appearance through experiences in the social world, and by extension how the transgender person conceptually builds the social world they inhabit by navigating between conflict and acceptance they experience.

Conceptual Framework

With queer theory and social constructivism in mind, individual experiences of transgender persons who live in rural areas was first described in terms of the context of his, her, or hir environments, followed by an interpretive analysis of common themes that emerge from the interview data using within-case and cross-case comparisons. The interpretive lens for this dissertation was constructivist in terms of the interpersonal and systemic microaggressions participants experienced on a daily basis, which were influenced by the multiple identities the participants carried (Sue, 2010). A second interpretive lens rooted in queer theory guided the data analysis in terms of self-directed

identity and the discovery process of learning new information about transgender identity. Queer theory was used to analyze the participants' changing personal narrative to align more with how they wished to express themselves. A more thorough explanation and analysis of social constructivism and queer theory are discussed in Chapter 2 of this dissertation, as well as a figure representing the framework. The framework progressed in a linear fashion through four stages and incorporates ideas from rural identity development, transgender identity development, in a constructivist, self-determined framework. The framework relates to the research questions in terms of how transgender people in rural areas come to self-identify as transgender and the extent of the influence online communities and social structures have on the individual.

Nature of the Study

In qualitative methodology, new theories and concepts often emerge from the data they are collected and analyzed through inductive reasoning, instead of the traditional quantitative research methodology of theory testing (Creswell, 2009; Hays & Wood, 2011; Rudestam & Newton, 2007). Qualitative research is sometimes described as soft research because of the limited generalizability of the outcomes and the researcher's subjective interpretations of the observed phenomena; however, qualitative research has been shown to be a valid and useful tool in social science research (Creswell, 2013; Hays & Wood, 2011). This research was conducted using a qualitative approach of multiple case study design (Creswell, 2013; Rudestam & Newton, 2007; Stake, 1995; Yin, 2014). The multiple case-study design fit well with the rural geographic location of the study and the limited number of potential participants living in this area. The key phenomenon

being investigated in this study was the context of the identity development process of transgender people living in a rural area, specifically how identity development happened through participation in online communities and seeking out online resources.

Methodology

The purpose of this study was to examine the lives of transgender people in a rural area and their experiences in discovering his, her, or hir identity through participation in online communities and seeking out online resources. The primary research design was a multiple case study in which four cases were identified as the participants of the study, two male-to-female (transwomen) and two female-to-male (transmen) participants (Creswell, 2009, 2013; Patton, 2012; Yin, 2014). The number of participants was selected based on the potential difficulty in locating willing participants for the study and to allow for several sessions with each participant to achieve prolonged exposure with the participants, as well as building rapport with each participant to gather rich and detailed information. The participants were interviewed and then additional time was spent with each participant after the interview reviewing cultural artifacts of his, her, or hir experiences of identity development (websites; discussion boards; videos; and person items such as wigs, make up, clothing, etc.) and observing the participants in his, her, or hir own environment while they continue normal daily routines. An initial 60-90 minute interview contact was scheduled first, followed by another 60-90 minute contact to review cultural/physical artifacts. Lastly, 5-10 minute shorter contacts were made in which participant observation or direct observation methods were used. Four primary sources of data gathered were participant interviews, cultural artifacts, participant

observations, and an art project the participant finished that symbolized their journey up to the time of the study (Yin, 2014). Purposeful sampling was used to locate participants beginning with key informants (Creswell, 2013; Patton, 2002). The key informants were connected to the transgender community and provided the link between myself and the community for the purpose of identifying cases.

Participants were interviewed with a semistructured interview using probing questions developed by myself and reviewed by the dissertation committee. Each interview lasted approximately 1 hour. After the interview, field notes were collected during a review of cultural artifacts while the participants showed me items that symbolized his, her, or hir transition journey during development as a transgender person. The cultural artifacts that were reviewed included URL addresses of websites and discussion boards, book titles, and individual personal items important to the individual's identity development. Third, participant and direct observations were conducted in an environment of his, her, or hir choosing in which I observed and took notes while the participants carried on with normal activities during these observation times in the person's preferred gender role. I asked the participants questions during the observation for clarification or the reasons behind doing what they were doing at the time they were doing it. Lastly, one participant completed the art project assignment and photos of this project appear in the body of the work.

The research methodology used in this study was a multiple case study design, which required me to describe my own biases in detail in the text of the research report (Creswell, 2013; Patton, 2002), which I have done in Appendix B at the end of the

document. Another method used in this work to control researcher bias was to construct a brief interview protocol with open-ended questions that I answered to address my own biases. A committee member reviewed the written answers to the questions and provided feedback. This data were included in the results section as a means to control for researcher bias.

Qualitative Data Analysis

The data analysis procedures in this study followed case study data analysis strategies and techniques. Two strategies were employed in the data analysis process; specifically, within-case and cross-case analyses were conducted to document the rich detail of the participant experiences and compare and contrast participant experiences (Yin, 2014). These strategies allowed me to follow the logical paths of development, regardless of the nonlinear nature of identity development. Three analytical techniques used included coding, categorical aggregation, and cross-case synthesis (Stake, 1995; Yin, 2014). Qualitative data analysis was also conducted using computer-assisted data analysis, specifically NVivo 10 software produced by QSR International (2012). This software package added the unique ability to organize and store large datasets from qualitative data sources, thus allowing me to conduct keyword searches, produce and store reflective data (memoing), and develop graphic representations of concepts to aid in the analysis of the data.

Sex and Gender Defined

Defining the term transgender becomes problematic because of the flexibility of gender and the imperfection of biology. Below is a list of terms commonly found in the literature.

Cisgender: When a person's gender identity matches the sex assigned at birth and societal norms for gender expression (Schilt & Westbrook, 2009). This definition is complimentary to transgender.

Intersexed: Another term applied to people who are born with "ambiguous genitalia" and are assigned a sex at birth (Carroll et al., 2002).

Sex: A biological term referring to the anatomical sex organs a person possesses, while *gender* is a psychological identity of feeling like a man or a woman (Abbott, 2009; Bockting, Knudson, & Goldberg, 2006; Carroll et al., 2002).

Transgender: A broad term that describes the experience in which a person's gender identity conflicts with the sex assigned at birth or societal norms for gender expression (Bilodeau, 2005; Bilodeau & Renn, 2005; Bornstein, 1994; Brown & Rounsely, 1996; Feinberg, 1996; Wilchins, 1996, 2002). This term includes other terms such as male-to-female (MTF), female-to-male (FTM), genderqueer, transsexual, male and female impersonators, drag kings and queens, cross-dressers, and gender benders.

Transvestite: A term that first appeared in the 1980s and referred to people who preferred to dress in opposite gender clothing; the term is focused strictly on the outward appearance (Carroll, Gilroy, & Ryan, 2002).

For the purpose of this research, the term transgender referred to people who have identified that his, her, or hir natal sex, or the sex they were assigned at birth, is incongruent with the internal experience of gender and/or preferred gender expression. The participants in this study were in various stages of transition and gender expression, which may or may not include the use of hormones or surgical interventions. The working definitions for this study were based on the literature of the researchers described in the above paragraph. *Sex* was used to describe the biological sexual organs at the time a person is born, also referred to as natal sex. The terms *male*, *female*, and *intersex* were used as sex terms. *Gender* referred to the psychological identity of being a man, woman, both, or neither within the mind of a person. Gender pronouns used were *his, her,* or *hir,* and the participants were asked their preferred gender pronoun at first contact. Throughout the study, the sex or gender that was used to describe a person reflected the preferred pronoun the person identified to which they belong.

Assumptions

Three underlying assumptions are present in most qualitative studies, namely postpositivist, constructivist, and critical (Creswell, 2000; Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Each of these three paradigm assumptions influences the structure of qualitative research in terms of validity (trustworthiness) and methodology (Creswell, 2000). Creswell (2000) summarized each assumption concisely and accurately. The postpositivist assumption, beginning in the 1970s through today, implies that the research strives for empirical support and that the methodology of the research design supports the validity of the study. The constructivist assumption, which emerged in the 1970s through the 1980s,

posits that reality is “pluralistic, interpretive, open-ended, and contextualized” (Creswell, 2000, p. 125). The constructivist assumption provides the framework for trustworthiness in qualitative research measured through credibility, transferability, dependability, confirmability, and authenticity. Lastly, the critical assumption implies that the current social structures are based in historical context and may not fit with contemporary philosophy. The historical context becomes the lens in which the culture is based.

When applied to transgender issues and context, more assumptions emerged specific to gender and society. The first assumption regarding transgender identity development was that every transgender person would eventually have surgery on his, her, or hir chest and genitals to make them look more like the preferred gender, which is not always true. The extent of physical alterations a transgender person is willing to go through is unique to each person’s identity development. Transgender people may decide to start hormone therapy, and some may not choose this. Some transgender people opt to have no surgery, or only have “top surgery” (i.e., female-to-male transgender person getting a breast reduction or a male-to-female transgender person having breast augmentation), or have both top and “bottom surgery” (genital surgery to reconstruct a vagina or penis, or vice-versa, from the existing sex organs). This was meaningful to the current study for three reasons. First, the extent of surgical intervention a person chooses to make is related to his, her, or hir identity development as a transgender person. Second, being knowledgeable about this allows me to be sensitive to multicultural issues, which is important to maintain during the research process and demonstrate professionalism of the researcher. Third, socioeconomic status and poverty each have a

role to play in a transgender person's choice to begin hormone or surgical therapy, and the rural area of this study is economically depressed, which limits a person's ability to access care. In addition, employment may be difficult for a transgender person in a rural area because of the stigma associated with his, her, or hir identity.

A second assumption pertinent to this study was that the terms male and female are discrete concepts that are antithetical to one another, which is an antiquated paradigm that does not fit with the philosophy of this study. Although gender has been demonstrated by several studies on transgender and intersex topics to be a fluid continuum, the majority of society continues to believe in the male-female dichotomization of the world. Therefore, the scope of this research included this continuum of sex and gender rather than the dichotomous view, and it is essential for the reader to bear in mind that sex and gender do fall on a continuum, which is related to transgender identity development in terms of how the person's self-concept develops over time, and that gender is a fluid concept and to a discrete dichotomy.

Because of these assumptions, participants in this research project were never asked to provide proof of their transgender status in any way. This is an important assertion to make for readers who are naïve to transgender etiquette and social norms; the participants self-identified as transgender and they were included in the study without the need to demonstrate commitment to his, her, or hir identity. Simply stating they are transgender was sufficient for the scope of this study. This approach is in line with queer theory and constructivist thinking, namely in that participants are in control of his, her, or hir own narratives and create realities about the world.

Additionally, there was an assumption that the individual's transition is part of a normal human developmental process and was not inherently indicative of a mental illness. Lastly, was the assumption that most participants will have experienced some stress associated with the coming out process, as transphobia is a pervasive social problem in the United States, particularly in rural areas. With these assumptions in mind, the lens of the researcher (etic perspective) and the lens of the participants (emic perspective) worked in cooperation to improve the trustworthiness of the data in the study (Creswell, 2000).

Scope and Delimitations

The scope of the current study was defined geographically as a rural area of a Midwestern state, including 26 counties. Transgender people of all ages who lived in this area were the potential participants for the study. The geographic area of the state for this study had a minimal amount of trans-friendly mental health specialists and a lack of qualified medical providers. There were several transgender friendly medical and mental health providers in other areas of the state, but these providers were only accessible by car or bus and required several hours of travel to reach. Given these barriers, transgender people discover their identity in a potentially unfriendly climate with a lack of trans-friendly messages from the larger community or resources to access to begin their transition.

A delimitation of the study was in the operational definition of transgender for this study. For purposes of this study, the term transgender includes several categorical identities, such as genderqueer, queer, genderless, cross dressing, and any other

permutation of the word. Also, participants were limited to MTF- and FTM-identified individuals. This delimitation was done for simplicity and the limited number of transgender identified people living in the area who would be willing to participate in a research study.

Due to the isolated nature of the participants living in a rural area, the study did not apply to transgender people in general, or even transgender people from other rural areas. Trustworthiness of the data was described in terms of future directions of research and clinical recommendations based on the limited number of participants and limited geographical scope (Onwuegbuzie & Leech, 2010).

Limitations

Every research approach and tradition possesses strengths and limitations in design and methodology. A limitation of the current design was that the group being studied was fragmented and spread out over a large geographic area, but connected through online resources. The barrier of geography was a challenge to overcome to operationalize this study.

Qualitative research projects lack the standardization that quantitative studies have in terms of established rules and regulations for reliability and validity (Maxwell, 2013; Miles & Huberman, 1994). Therefore, qualitative researchers use a different lexicon to describe quality measures in research practices, such as transferability, credibility, dependability, confirmability, and application/action of the research (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Miles & Huberman, 1994; Patton, 2002). For this dissertation, I used strategies such as prolonged engagement, member checks, saturation, thick description,

participant debriefing, triangulation of data, audit trails, reflexive journaling, negative case description, and self-exploration of my own biases (Creswell, 2013; Maxwell, 2013; Miles & Huberman, 1994; Patton, 2002). I also asked committee members to verify the content of my questions in the interview protocol for face validity. Lastly, I provided the participant with a copy of his, her, or hir own transcribed interview for debriefing and approval.

Other strategies used in this work were triangulating data from at least three sources, keeping a breadcrumb journal of each step of the process for independent verification through the use of the NVivo software, and providing a detailed report of the analytical steps I took in analyzing the data (Creswell, 2013; Maxwell, 2013; Miles & Huberman, 1994; Patton, 2002; Yin, 2014). Multiple quality assurance strategies can improve and maintain the quality of the study and achieve trustworthiness.

I am also a member of the LGBTQ community as a gay man, and I am also a native to the geographic area of study. These two aspects of my identity may have been problematic in terms of bias and missed information during the research process, specifically because of the closeness of my own identity to the people I interviewed. Conversely, there may have also be a benefit to being a native of the geographic area and a member of the LGBTQ community as these aspects of my identity may have provided me with access to people who would not otherwise invite a researcher into their lives. A researcher biographical sketch appears in the appendices (see Appendix B).

Significance

The potential significance of the current study became clear when I began providing therapy services to the transgender community in the town in which I practice. Transgender mental health services are sometimes sufficient in urban areas, but are often lacking in rural areas (Bockting et al., 2006; Bouman, Bauer, Richards, & Coleman, 2010; Carroll et al., 2002; Coleman et al., 2011; Datti, 2012; Drumheller & McQuay, 2010; Eliason & Hughes, 2004; Mizock & Fleming, 2011). I discovered there was a sizable transgender population in the rural areas around the town where my practice was located. Despite a lack of resources, every transgender person I worked with eventually discovered online resources and started to become acculturated into the transgender community through these online resources, which led some to travel several hours and meet the people they communicated with online in larger cities. The individuals I worked with never relocated to urban areas and continued transitioning where they lived.

My professional practice in this area led me to research treatment options and resources for transgender people nearby, and I found a lack of any sort of resources for this population who needed medical care to transition. Mental health professionals are often the first health care providers sought out by transgender people, but there were few counseling professionals who have the specialized knowledge required to work with this population, or even a basic knowledge of gender identity development (Bockting et al., 2006; Bouman et al., 2010; Carroll et al., 2002; Coleman et al., 2011; Datti, 2012; Drumheller & McQuay, 2010; Eliason & Hughes, 2004; Mizock & Fleming, 2011; Nuttbrock et al., 2009). Counselors can perpetuate an unsupportive environment by

exhibiting a lack of knowledge in transgender issues, and this research could be used to inform and educate counselors on the topic.

This research contributes to positive social change by bringing to light the issues that transgender people in rural areas struggle with and the mechanisms by which transgender people in rural areas learn about transgender culture and identity. Secondly, I aimed to empower the women and men in the study as unique individuals in areas that may or may not be friendly to their transgender identities by telling their stories for others to learn and gain insight from. In addition, I intended to inform the professional community about a vulnerable and hidden population, the transgender community, by shedding light on this unique population, and providing guidance for professional counselors who work with transgender people in rural areas with unique needs and issues.

Summary

There is little to no research on the identity development process of transgender people who live in a rural area. This population of transgender people may differ qualitatively from transgender people who exist in more metropolitan areas with more social supports in terms of medical/mental health care and support from the transgender community. Indeed, there is no transgender community to speak of in most rural areas. Therefore, the community is found in online venues where transgender people from rural areas can connect with others like them.

The intention of this study was to use a multiple case study design to collect rich and descriptive data on this mostly invisible population and provide context to how the lives of transgender people in a rural area unfold. This study benefits the field of

counseling by shining a light on the barriers transgender people in rural areas face and how they learn to overcame those barriers, sometimes without counseling intervention. The goal of the study was to open the academic literature to a new line of investigation of a vulnerable population that is underserved and unsupported. My hope was that this research informed mental health counselors who provide treatment to transgender clients with a new perspective to work with a transgender person who lives in, or is from, a rural area.

Chapter 2 contains a review of the literature on transgender identity development models and online community culture. In Chapter 3, I discuss research design and format in detail. Chapter 4 contains all results of the study, and Chapter 5 discusses interpretations and conclusions that were drawn from the data. Supporting documentation and artifacts of research are found in the appendices.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Introduction

The process of how a transgender person in a rural area discovers his, her, or hir identity and the experiences of what happens next has not been studied in the extant literature. The problem investigated in this study pertained to gender identity development, specifically transgender identity development, in people who lived in rural areas and how online communities and resources influenced and shaped the identity forming experience. This study was a multiple case study on the identity development process of transgender people living in a rural area who used online resources and literary works. The main goal of the study was to provide insight and interpretive analysis of the discovery and identity development process for transgender people who live in a rural area, which was expected to be a different experience from transgender people who live in an urban area with many social supports and active transgender communities. The body of literature reviewed dates back to the 1970s research of transgenderism and encompasses identity development, more contemporary research on the culture of online communities, as well as transgender issues in rural areas.

In this chapter, I discuss the literature search strategy, theoretical foundation, and the conceptual framework. I also present a comprehensive review of the literature. Some of the salient topics that are covered in this chapter are gender in society, transgender identity development models, transgender research in rural communities, health considerations, the culture of online communities, and a summary of transgender literature.

Literature Search Strategy

Many primary and secondary sources were reviewed from the literature. The literature was found through many searches of academic databases from EBSCOhost Research such as PsycINFO, PsycARTICLES, Academic Search Premier, CINAHL Plus with Full Text, ERIC – Educational Resource Information Center, LGBT Life with Full Text, MEDLINE with Full Text, ProQuest, PubMed, Sage Premier, and SocINDEX with Full Text. Previous research and online sources were also found through Internet searches on Google search engine; Google Scholar search engine; and other online platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and online media sources that would fall into the definition of online communities. A broad-based search was performed because of the dearth of available information on transgender people who resided in rural areas in order to capture the largest spectrum of available information.

The keyword search began with the first three main themes of the study: *transgender identity development, rural geography*, and *online communities*. The additional keywords also included were *gender identity, gender benders, gender bending, gender expression, identity development models, rural conditions, rural development, rural families, rural geography, rural health, rural health services, rural LGBT people, rural gays, rural gay men, lesbian, bisexual, transgender health, transgender communities, online chat, online comments, virtual communities, electronic directories, electronic discussion groups, online identities, online information services, online social networks, transgender families, narrative inquiry, ethnography, case study,* and *queer theory*.

Several of the terms listed above were combined throughout the literature search in an iterative manner to achieve saturation of literature. Terms such *as transgender identity* and *rural* yielded few results, so another combination such as *transgender identity* and *rural conditions* was used to ensure that all terms were combined in such a way that each term was combined at least once with one other term. The EBSCOhost Research database search was not limited by any filters such as date, full-text, academic journal, or category to allow for a comprehensive assortment of data to be discovered.

The database searches yielded several results in specific areas; for example, a keyword search of *transgender identity* would yield thousands of articles, but when combined with a term such as *rural conditions* there would be no results. This led to an expansion of the search terms such as *LGBT, gay, gay men, lesbian*, and *bisexual*. Using broader terms revealed literature that collectively identified transgender persons in the larger LGBTQ category under keywords such as *rural* and *online communities*. The Internet searches were conducted using similar methods to identify available online communities and resources such as discussion boards, chat rooms, Facebook pages, Twitter feeds, and autobiographical websites of transgender people.

The term *transgender* revealed several social media websites and autobiographical websites produced by transgender people (Cole, n.d.; Jazz A Corner For Transgender Kids, 2012; Molloy, 2013; Proud to Be a Transsexual, 2010; Transgender Guide, 2013; Transgender Law Center, 2013; Transgender Legal, 2013; Transgender News, 2013; Transgender Support Group, 2010, www.channel4.com, 2013). The search terms used for the online community search included the terms *transgender biographies*,

transgender stories, *transgender Facebook*, and *transgender Twitter*. All terms were searched using the Google search engine.

During the search, several studies were found in which transgender identity development was the main topic (Bilodeau, 2005, Bilodeau & Renn, 2005, D'Augelli, 1994, Veale et al., 2010). Other topics in past studies that were combined with sexual and gender orientation included Christian experiences (Yarhouse & Carrs, 2012), sexual orientation in FTM transsexuals (Bockting, Benner, & Coleman, 2009), gender identity development in children and adolescents (Ehrensaft, 2011; Glover, Galliher, & Lamere, 2009; McHale, Crouter, & Tucker, 1999), and appearance during transition (Kozee, Tylka, & Bauerband, 2012). Although several studies were found in which LGBTQ issues were studied in rural areas (D'Augelli, 2006; Datti, 2012; Drumheller & McQuay, 2010; Eliason & Hughes, 2004; Kazyak, 2011; Yost & Chmielewski, 2011), the search revealed no studies performed in which identity development of transgender people who live in a rural area was the primary focus of the study. This was determined after an exhaustive search in which saturation of scholarly articles had been reached determined by duplicate search results occurring. The search was limited to the three themes of the study, vis-à-vis, transgender identity, online communities, and rural geography; however, there were no limits on the adjectives used as search terms in order to perform the most exhaustive study possible to find relevant literature.

Theoretical Foundation

The theoretical foundation of this study was grounded in queer theory and social constructivism. These two theories were blended to provide an interpretive lens of the participants' experiences. Both theories are discussed in further detail below.

Queer Theory

The theoretical approach for this dissertation included both queer theory and social constructivism. Queer theory aligns with the fluidity of gender paradigm and focuses on individual identity and self-determination (Brown, 2012; Creswell, 2013; Garry, 2011; Hill, 2007; McNeil, 2010; Olive & Thorpe, 2011). The term queer theory begins to appear in academic literature in the mid-1990s and stems from the field of sociology. Queer theory is theoretically based in constructivist and feminist epistemology of sexuality and gender, which explains sexuality and gender as socially constructed concepts that are open to being challenged (Brown, 2012; Creet, 2000; Dean, 1993; Derbyshire, 1994; Epstein, 1994; Mandell, 1991; McNeil, 2010; Namaste, 1994; Savage & Julien, 1994; Seidman, 1994; Stein & Plummer, 1994; Wallace, 1994). Stein and Plummer (1994) stressed that queer theory represented a paradigm shift in sociology to be more inclusive of LGBTQ issues in sociology than in years past, bringing the study of LGBTQ life out of the margins and into the mainstream. Derbyshire (1994) criticized queer theory as being too political and assimilationist that inadvertently supported heterosexist views of LGBTQ people. Queer theory and social constructivism can be combined to build a theoretical framework based on the self-determination of the individual and the fluid, rather than dichotomous, nature of gender, which is important in

studying transgender populations. Queer theorists support the discovery and experiential process that transgender people must face alone in rural areas where there is no overt social support network for them to plug into.

The major theoretical concepts underpinning queer theory are that sexuality and gender are identities that are socially, historically, and culturally bound (Dean, 1993; Epstein, 1994; Namaste, 1994) and that sexuality and gender are political aspects of identity that people choose to express in their own way (Creet, 2000; Namaste, 1994). The personal choice orientation of queer theory allows for a person to self-identify with multiple identities; each identity is not more or less than another, referred to as the multiplicity of identities (Brown, 2012; Garry, 2011). The discovery process of identifying as transgender while maintaining a rural identity illustrates this personal choice characteristic of queer theory. Reclaiming the term *queer* from a diminutive word to a power word that carries with it a political identity that the person using the word is standing up for his, her, or hir identity is part of the intent of queer theory. There are several theorists that started using the term queer theory from as far back as the 1960s with the proliferation of the term queer theory in the 1990s (Creet, 2000). Queer theory makes an assumption that the term queer has flexible and inclusive qualities for anyone in the LGBTQ community to take up a voice in the political arena. Using queer theory, biological bases of determining sex and gender are discarded and replaced with personal choice and self-identification of the identity the person wishes to inhabit.

Researchers have used queer theory to deconstruct social ideas and concepts and reify a political context for sexuality and gender. Queer theory has been used as an

analytical tool in business advertising (Kates, 1999), social change and politics (Jackson, 2000; Kirsch, 2000), religion (Neitz, 2000), and counselor education (Carroll & Gilroy, 2001). Other theories such as queer feminist, ecological, and queer ecological feminist identities stem from a foundation based in queer theory (Polk, 2001). Indeed, queer theory has taken on many faces through its evolution and has provided a voice to people who have not had the privilege of belonging to the sex they were assigned at birth. The theory speaks to the struggles gender variant people pass through during their transitions and the importance of personal choice and agency in the formation of an identity, especially in a rural area. Queer theory fits with this dissertation study in the deconstruction of multiple identities and self-determination of the participants. Although there are many theoretical essays and position papers on queer theory, there are few experimental studies that I could locate that used queer theory as a theoretical foundation. Below is a review of the literature that was located that did use queer theory as the guiding theory, but not all of them are specifically centered on transgender studies.

Butler (2003) utilized queer theory in an autoethnographic essay on the organization known as Community Members Against Discrimination (CMAD), an LGBTQ advocacy organization in Dekalb, IL. The purpose of the essay described the events of an advocacy campaign in September of 2000 with city council members to add protective language against discrimination on the basis of gender identity or expression to the city charter. The literature review was comprehensive and relevant, and also justified the research. The essay utilized queer theory as a theoretical lens and thick description as the primary ethnographic tool. Butler used queer theory to frame the study in categories

and subject headings that highlighted the social justice and advocacy purpose of the campaign. Consistent with queer theory self-directed narrative, a few of the headings in the article were direct quotes from the author's experience of the process to get the city council members to vote for adopting the anti-discrimination language. Butler also described the strategy, testimony, and vote in social justice language and queer politics. Although this is an essay, the procedures and interpretive analysis are clearly laid out for the reader. The author does not discuss the validity of autoethnography, but discusses past uses of the methodology to capture significant moments within a larger context. Discussion and conclusions were not separated into paragraphs or headings but scattered throughout the study and offered at significant points in the story, which allowed the author to offer conclusions while telling the story instead of at the end. Butler used queer theory as an interpretive lens in a way that is consistent with gender politics and advocacy, both of which are important in transgender studies in general.

Queer theory has also been used as an interpretive method in a business application, specifically as a method of deconstructing advertising materials from a sociopolitical epistemology (Kates, 1999). The purpose of the article was twofold, first to elaborate on queer theory and its use in deconstructing advertising text and graphics in ads targeted to gay consumers, and second as an example of using queer theory to analyze an ad from an Australian newspaper. Several aspects of queer theory are reviewed from the literature, such as past theoretical works in queer theory, a discussion about sexuality, gender, and power, the politics of gender, meanings of the word 'queer', a critique of the sexual dichotomy, and scholarly applications of the theory; which also

clearly explains the theoretical orientation of the study. This study is essentially a case study using an ad pulled from a newspaper as an exemplar of how advertising currently markets to gay consumers. The ad that is analyzed is published in the body of the article for the reader to review and the analysis is clearly explained in a step-by-step manner. Kates provided a detailed discussion of the analysis and the value of using queer theory to highlight how ads can be interpreted from several points of view, which can inform how advertisers create ads that can market to a wider audience while providing richer detail and more authentic ads. Both structuralist and queer deconstruction methods were used successfully in identifying power and otherness in advertisements, but queer theory seems better at revealing heteronormative language and otherness in the ads. Kates successfully showed how queer theory can be used in analyzing cultural artifacts drawn from LGBTQ culture to illuminate the differences between heteronormative discourse and LGBTQ life, which were pertinent to this study.

In an essay authored by Kerry (2009), queer theory is used again as an analytical tool for deconstructing societal norms in terms of gender and sexuality in a pop culture artifact, namely the popular television show *Star Trek*. The purpose of the essay was to make an epistemological link between cultural artifacts, vis-à-vis the *Star Trek* series, and queer theory. The review of queer theory was brief but comprehensive while the review of episodes and movies from the *Star Trek* franchise were much more detailed. The theoretical foundation was not well discussed other than the brief review of queer theory literature. Kerry held up *Star Trek* series and movies as examples of the ‘other’ (in this article gender queer, genderless, and other fluid descriptions of sex and gender

orientation) persevering to fight for equality and justice. Kerry described *Star Trek* and other science fiction stories as examples of opposing the status quo and how society adjusted to accommodate more expressions of sexual and gender orientation after political advocacy and social justice movements. Kerry argued that these television shows highlighted contemporary ideals of sex and gender against the gender binary heteronormative world. The conclusions of the essay justified the use of queer theory as a tool to evaluate cultural artifacts from a more fluid and adaptable conceptual framework than traditional gender dichotomous theories, and that queer theory opens the interpretive lens for a researcher to discuss broader sex and gender alternatives than male-or-female. Reviewing pop-culture artifacts, like a television show, was important in terms of understanding the messages the culture receives through media outlets, and was important to the current study because of the extent transgender people access information from the public domain and media outlets; and that rural transgender people use this information to discover their identity, learn more about the transition process, or integrate the new identity into the existing identity, and how these websites and literature shape the new identity.

Queer theory informed and guided research into how individuals assert their identities in public spaces and the political repercussions of outing themselves. DeJean (2010) provided an autoethnographic analysis of a conversation between himself and a student by analyzing email and verbal conversations between the two of them over many years. The purpose of the essay was clearly laid out to provide the first-hand account of a conversation between teacher and student in terms of how their sexual orientations

affected their professional identities as high school teachers. DeJean was a gay male high school teacher and Jeannie (his student) was a lesbian whom the author met while she was completing her teaching degree. Any sort of review of the literature was peppered throughout the essay where the author cited previous theoretical and experimental research that supports his use of queer theory as a reflective lens. The author did not review any limitations or threats to validity, but discussed autoethnography as a methodological process. In this example, the author used queer theory as an interpretive tool to analyze a conversation in much the same way that it was used in this current study. In the paper, DeJean shared the struggles and concerns they each have about coming out and asserting their full identity while trying to negotiate career identities and jobs. Jeannie contemplated at one point that she should move to a more urban area after college because of the belief she would have more professional opportunities in an area that is more accepting of her lesbian identity. One may expect a transgender person who discovers their new identity while living in a rural area to relocate to a more urban area, such as Jeannie shared in the study, with more resources and some form of active transgender community; however, this was not the case in my own personal and professional experience of working and with and befriending transgender people as a member of the LGBTQ community.

Queer theory has also been used in case study research to provide a theoretical lens for interpreting case study data such as direct observations. Røthing (2008) conducted a study to explore how heterosexuality and homosexuality are covered in sexual education curricula in primary schools in Norway. The author provided a

comprehensive literature review covering both sexual education politics and queer theory in the paper. Observations were made in tenth grade classrooms among three high schools in southern Norway, each of which taught the material using different pedagogical methods. Consistent with studies using queer theory as a theoretical lens, the author provided a description of the political climate in primary schools around the topic of sexuality education and gender. Gender and sexuality politics were considered high priority in Norwegian internal affairs as important civil rights issues and the country has cultivated an atmosphere of 'homotolerance' over many years. A large majority of Norwegian schools were public and all taught from a master curriculum provided through the Department of Education and Research of the federal government. The curriculum contained some homosexual material on par with heterosexual material, but in instances where sexuality was not explicitly addressed heteronormative narratives prevail. The author used case study research design, and the boundaries of the cases were clearly defined with rich case histories of the national sexual education curriculum and individual high school classes were provided. Røthing (2008) provided clear analytical process of the data and discusses the iterative analysis of the data by tying the themes in the data back to the literature review. This study was also a clear example of the use of queer theory in a case study design to analyze the schools' experiences through context of the cases, which was closely related to the proposed analysis in the current study.

In another case study using queer theory as a theoretical foundation, Petford (2006) investigated bisexual-identified therapists who were interviewed about their approaches to therapy. The purpose and need for the study are clearly outlined as a lack

of literature exists that specifically explores bisexual issues from a therapeutic point of view. Again, this is another case study; but unlike the previous study Petford (2006) did not go into any details about the boundaries of the case or report any case details. There was also a lack of context for the cases. Petford (2006) offered that a phenomenological method was used whereby nine co-researchers interviewed participants about their experiences as bisexual therapists via telephone; however, who the co-researchers interviewed were not identified. After the analysis, the data supported three identities of bisexual therapists, namely a bisexual identity, mental health and therapy, and the process of becoming a therapist. Phenomenological analysis through a queer/feminist theory lens was employed in terms of challenging the hetero-homosexual binary construction of sexual orientation. The rigor of the study was questionable in that there was no demographic data on the participants, in fact there was really no mention of participants other than nine co-researchers who conducted interviews without any number given, and there was no description of the analytical process. The depth of the study was adequate in terms of theoretical background and conceptual framework; however more data about the participants/cases, boundaries of the cases, data gathering process, and analysis would make the study stronger. Petford's analysis was superficial and offered conclusions that were somewhat generalized in that the findings were suggested to apply to all bisexual therapists and clients based on the interview data of this single study, which is not appropriate for this type of study. No limitations or threats to validity of the study were identified. Despite the limitations of this study, the author did a thorough job of analyzing

case study interview data through a queer theory lens, and the formation of an identity that was often overlooked are both issues salient to the current study.

These examples from research show how queer theory has informed conceptual frameworks of studies ranging from business applications to popular culture. Queer theory has a long established history of being used as an interpretive tool when analyzing aspects of culture and society. For this research, queer theory provided a foundation to approach participants in a way that is not threatening and respects their preferred pronouns and identities while capturing the discovery and experiential processes the participants go through on their journey to a different gender. Transgender people have often struggled with fundamental aspects of their identity and how they fit into the larger world (Bockting, et al., 2009; Nuttbrock, et al., 2009). Queer theory allowed me to honor the participants' choices and beliefs about their bodies, despite the social pressures of conformity and gender normativity. The current research provided support for the application of queer theory for counselors working with transgender clients by explaining the issues transgender clients in rural areas struggle with in society, supporting client choices, sometimes in direct opposition to the messages being received from the larger community, particularly in a rural area. The second theoretical foundation of this study was social constructivism and dovetails well with queer theory in the conceptual framework outlined later in the chapter in terms of how the data are to be analyzed.

Social Constructivism

A social constructivist paradigm was used as a second theoretical foundation for this dissertation. Social constructivism was a postmodern approach rooted in Kantian

philosophy and reasoning that explains reality from a relativist position and accepts the notion of multiple equally valid realities (Andrews, 2012; Lee, 2012; Ponterotto, 2005) through internal psychological experience. Social constructivism was first mentioned in a 1926 paper on comparative sociology in which the author described two fundamental constructs: a) that there is no scientifically accurate way to measure the amount of ‘thinking’ that is part of the collective behavior of humans and b) that human beings are unaware of the social influences between them (Markey, 1926). Markey (1926) discussed the concept of humans as social animals who create their own realities and that these realities are comparatively vague, indefinite, and insecure. Social constructivism stemmed from the work of notable anthropologists, such as Mead and Durkheim, and philosophers Schutz and Marx (Andrews, 2012). These interpretivists focused on man’s ability to construct meaning through social interactions and things in the environment, leading to other conceptual frameworks such as social phenomenology, symbolic interactionism, and interpretive sociology.

Some terms are unique to social constructivism that should be defined. The terms *social constructivism, constructivism, social constructionist*, and *constructionist are* often used interchangeably and all refer to the philosophy that each person’s individual reality is created subjectively within the person to fit their global concept of the world and how it works through an interaction with people and objects in the world (Andrews, 2012; Lee, 2012). In simpler terms, individual people create their realities from their point of view. There are some minor differences that need to be clarified, however. Social constructionism defines culture as a set of rituals, practices, and beliefs created by a

society or community, whereas constructivism is a cognitive process within an individual to mentally construct the world through interactions with the world and people in it (Andrews, 2012). This study relied on the definition of social constructivism as a cognitive process between the individual and his, her, or hir environment that the individual uses to define their world. Realism and relativism are two terms often found in social constructivist literature and are antipodal terms along a continuum. Realism focuses on finding the *truth* that is waiting to be found while relativism posits that behavioral norms vary between individual beliefs and larger cultural norms (Andrews, 2012). Social constructivism is often criticized for a lack of realism, or an objective reality that simply exists, and of falling too far toward relativism, or the subjective reality that each person carries with them (Andrews, 2012). In qualitative studies, constructivism assumes that knowledge is generated between researcher and participant through a process of exploring meaning in the lived experiences of the person (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). Social constructivism fits well with qualitative research methodology by elevating the lived experiences of individuals and giving a voice to individual experience. In the present study, constructivism helped explain how transgender people in a rural area mentally construct their new identity through interactions between themselves and two outside influences, namely the online resources and literature they absorb and the rural community they exist in through daily life.

Writing about transgenderism from a transgender epistemology is lacking in literature and academia (Alexander, 2005). The essay authored by Alexander was intended to inspire pedagogical feminist composition approaches in academic

communication studies. At the heart of the paper was the idea that transgender theories drawn from transgender narratives, and written by transgender people, enhanced the understanding of gender as an identity and not as a biologically assigned sex. Although this was not a research study, the paper goes beyond arguing for a stronger voice from the transgender community in academia and focused on the value that transgender theory can add to existing identity theory from a social constructivist lens. The present study intended to follow this call for more transgender academic literature and generating empirical knowledge about transgender issues by highlighting the unique struggles rural transgender people face in discovering a new identity and transition experiences.

Academic studies of marginalized and vulnerable populations can shed light on the challenges and successes of the group, which generates new knowledge. Berkowitz (2010) reviewed the book *Queering families: Lesbian and gay parents and their children* and remarked that this is one of the foundational texts of bringing lesbian and gay parenting out of the margins and into the mainstream of family theorizing and scholarship. Examples such as this fuel the need for studies such as this dissertation. The author stated that the book used social constructionism as a conceptual framework, in addition to ecological and life course theories. This text was a clear example of the use of social constructionism in LGBTQ studies as a research paradigm that informed a conceptual framework.

The following year, Berkowitz (2011) completed a study in which 12 in-depth interviews were conducted with men who identified as gay and who had started the process of adoption to become fathers, or had gone through the process and had adopted

children. The purpose of the study was to generate knowledge to understand the challenges of fatherhood for gay men in the transition through adoption, and second to analyze symbols and social meaning gay men attach to themselves and their children during the process. Again, this was a case study and the procedures in this study were very clear and could be easily replicated. The participants, who were all white men who were not biological fathers, were recruited from Miami, FL and New York City, NY and all lived in upper-middle class households. Berkowitz used feminist theory and symbolic interactionism, which guided and informed her theoretical lens of analysis of themes in the interviews she conducted. Her study examined the intersection of identities and symbolic meanings the participants attributed to themselves and their children. Two conclusions that the author drew from the data were that there was a flashbulb moment in each couple when they became acutely aware that their status was changing from non-parent to parent, and that the process required revision of traditional definitions of concepts, for example what makes a family, to accommodate their own new family. These conclusions were important in terms of how a transgender person in a rural area likely experiences a similar flashbulb moment of discovery followed by experiences that shape the new identity to fit with their current cultural identities. The study was well organized, solidly designed and could easily be replicated, but the author stated the study was part of her dissertation research, so the study itself seemed to be an ad hoc study. Nonetheless, this study used social constructivism as an interpretive tool in the analysis of interview data for the study in a similar way that this research project data for the study respective of this research project.

Another study, completed by Kazyak (2011), proposed to explore the cultural narratives of rural lesbians and gay men due to research that points to a rural diaspora of gay men and lesbians. Kazyak developed a study of the individual identity development processes and cultural narratives of 30 gay and lesbian individuals living in rural Michigan and Illinois. The author drew her sample from Craigslist ads and used snowball sampling to recruit participants for face-to-face interviews, where she collected narrative interview data for analysis. Symbolic interactionism was used as a conceptual framework for the study. Kazyak revealed that gay men and lesbians in rural areas drew from their community attachments to construct gay and lesbian identities based on already existing rural identities. The analysis focused on the assumption that the cultural link between sexuality and urban living was qualitatively different than sexuality and rural areas, and highlighted the differences between urban and rural gay life by comparing participants who were currently living in rural areas to those living in urban areas. The focus was on the individual's process of constructing and sexual identity, which was grounded in social constructivism. This study was the closest approximation of the intended topic and methodology of this dissertation that I could locate in the literature, and the results of the study were important as similar results would be expected in rural transgender people who must learn to re-negotiate community attachments once they begin transitioning and coming out

Constructivism and queer theory are a natural fit to combine in research studies because of the nature of each theory. Both theories rely on multiple and fluid identities that are self-determined by the individual. Abes (2008) used a case study approach and

combined these two theories in a study that investigated a lesbian college student's perception of her sexual identity and the interactions of her other identities, such as race, gender, and religion. The study used narrative inquiry analysis to tell the story of the lived experiences of Jordana in terms of the individuation of her identities. The author identified that the transferability of a single case study is limited compared to a multiple case study methodology, but the single case provides more detail rich data to be analyzed and tells a deeper story of the individual's life experiences. Abes followed the case of Jordana over 2 years while each (participant and researcher) discussed notions of choice and self-determination in identity without following predetermined categories. Abes employed categorical analysis to analyze her conversations with Jordana and found that the combination of these theories challenged traditional notions of identity formation and the fluidity of individual self-defined identities. The combination of queer theory and social constructivism was successfully used in this study in terms of negotiating identities over time through individual experiences, in much the same way the current study proposed.

Together queer theory and social constructivism were the foundation of the conceptual framework for this study. Queer theory posited that gender is a fluid psychological identity that evolves in a person, and constructivism provided the foundation that individual realities are constructed from cultural norms through the individual interpretation and integration of the cultural knowledge. Constructivism provided the foundation for analysis of the meanings a transgender identity has in the individual lives of the participants while queer theory supported an analysis of power

structures in the rural environment (Abes, 2008). In this study, participants were asked to self-identify as transgender by self-report only and not asked for any other form of verification. This falls in line with queer theory principles of personal choice and self-determination. Queer theory was also used as a theoretical lens by which participants' lives are viewed as self-determined and that their rural identities are potentially in conflict with their gender identity. I posited that after discovery of a transgender identity, the dissonance arising from the new gender identity and other identities leads to an integration stage in which the participant finds ways to express their gender identity while also minimizing the potential danger of being different. I theorized that this occurs because of the circles of support people build in rural areas through close and repeated contact, whereby the participant is in control of the entire process through self-determination. The conceptual framework below blended these two theories and presented a way of thinking about transgender people living in a rural area and their experiences during their identity development process.

Conceptual Framework

The interpretive lens for this dissertation utilized queer theory and social constructivism in terms of interpersonal and systemic microaggressions in a person's daily life. The conceptual framework of the study was built on fundamental ideas from queer theory and social constructivism, specifically microaggressions, oppression, discrimination, transphobia, rural versus urban community structure, and empowerment.

Multiple identities may leave a person open to brief incidents of oppression, commonly referred to in contemporary literature as microaggressions (Sue, 2010). Sue

identified microaggressions as brief encounters a person may experience going through the routine of their day in which they experience an oppressive moment. Such a moment occurs when someone exclaims, ‘That’s so gay!’ in a crowd in which at least one person identifies as lesbian, gay, or bisexual; or if a person says ‘You must be here for the weight loss seminar’ to a person who is overweight and standing in line for something else (Sue, 2010). The potential for microaggressions may increase for a person who carries multiple minority identities, particularly identities that are not outwardly visible such as for a transgender person (Nadal, Skolnik, & Wong, 2012; Sue, 2010). Research into the topic of microaggressions is still new territory, and more research is needed to define and describe microaggressions experienced by people who identify as transgender (Nadal et al., 2012), which this study intends to provide. Given the multiplicity of identities in queer theory, the potential to experience a microaggression would increase with more minority identities a person carries. Microaggressions are potentially a source of stress over the duration of the identity development process. In a rural area, people who identified as transgender likely experienced microaggressions more often when interacting with other people who make disclaimer comments referring to or in the presence of the person.

One recent study (Shelton & Delgado-Romero, 2013) examined microaggressions that occur in the therapeutic process as experienced by LGBTQ identified therapy clients. The researchers sampled 16 LGBTQ identified therapy clients between the ages of 20 and 47 and a majority of who identified as White, and were well educated working toward professional degrees. Each participant had to have only engaged in one therapy

session with some form of mental health therapist (psychologist, social worker, counselor or marriage and family therapist). Data were collected through two small focus groups conducted by the primary researcher. Seven microaggression themes were identified in this study:

1. The assumption that sexual orientation was the cause of all presenting problems.
2. Avoidance and minimizing of sexual orientation.
3. Attempts to overidentify with LGBTQ clients.
4. Making stereotypical assumptions about LGBTQ clients.
5. Expression of heteronormative bias.
6. The assumption that LGBTQ individuals require treatment.
7. Warnings from the therapist about the dangers of identifying as LGBTQ.

Shelton and Delgado-Romero (2013) highlighted the damage small discriminatory acts, i.e., microaggressions, can have on LGBTQ clients and the need to conduct more research into this topic. This dissertation aimed to capture some of the microaggression messages, both verbal and nonverbal, that transgender people experienced while living in rural areas because of their identities. It also revealed that a no matter the training background, mental health therapists continued to imbue discrimination, intentionally or not, into therapy sessions that have detrimental consequences for LGBTQ clientele. In this sense, other people often unintentionally commit microaggressions, but they shaped the identity of the person in terms of how others perceive them.

A rural area often lacks a sense of commonality and normalized culture for transgender people in urban settings (Datti, 2012). Urban areas often have bookstores,

community centers, bars, and openly trans-friendly businesses that provide a sense of security and tolerance against the backdrop of the larger community. The lack of these supportive LGBTQ businesses and community resources in rural areas sends a subtle message to trans-identified people that ‘those things don’t happen here’. These subtle messages are examples of microaggressions that are perceptible only to trans-identified people (Shelton & Delgado-Romero, 2013; Sue, 2010). Transgender people may recognize small negative messages in language and print media that come from various sources in the environment. Microaggressions on a small scale may not significantly impact identity development, but the cumulative effect may mitigate a transgender person’s decision to come out and transition based on the social climate they perceive (Shelton & Delgado-Romero, 2013; Sue, 2010).

In a larger context, transgender people living in rural areas faced varying levels of discrimination and negativity from the communities in which they live, which is also referred to as transphobia. While urban centers offer transgender communities and LGBTQ resources, transgender people living in rural areas must often travel several hours to engage in a transgender community. In an essay, Crawford (2008) posited that imperceptibility is an alternative to passing because passing is moot in a rural area where everyone knows everyone else. An imperceptible transgender life in a rural area would mean that a transgender person is not worried about being readable or passing, but managed the coming out process on a moment to moment basis because of the closeness in which rural life is intertwined. Although the article was rife with colloquialisms and non-academic language, the idea of imperceptibility seems to be supported logically in a

rural area where anonymity was nearly impossible. Rural transgender people may strive for imperceptibility during their transition through managing the information about themselves in a community in which anonymity is not possible.

Maguen et al. (2007) conducted a survey study of predictors of disclosure of transgender identity. The authors revealed that involvement with a transgender community was a significant predictor of coming out; however, the participants for the study were gathered from a transgender conference and most, over 80%, were male-to-female identified. Maguen et al. (2007) showed that being involved in a transgender community predicted disclosure was in conflict with the notion that transgender people living in rural areas without access to a transgender community are less likely to come out. If membership in a transgender community was a significant predictor of coming out, transgender people in a rural area would either avoid coming out at all, or relocate to an area that has an active transgender community. In reality, these are not mutually exclusive options and people who live in a rural area do come out and continue living in rural communities without relocating. This study aimed to document these experiences that were currently not represented in the academic literature.

Rural identity development is intricately intertwined for transgender persons coming out in rural areas. Rural identity includes concepts such as regulation, neighbor knowledge, and surveillance (Hillyard & Bagley, 2011; Neal & Walters, 2006, 2007). Two dominant discourses exist in rural literature, namely the rural utopia and the rural crisis (Neal & Walters, 2006). Further, concepts of rural spaces range from safety and community to freedom and anti-order (Neal & Walters, 2007). Research on the

dichotomies of rural life were still yet poorly conceptualized and more research is necessary to capture the full picture of rural life. This was often difficult for researchers who come from an outsider, or etic, perspective as participants often try to portray rural life through these dichotomies using rehearsed identities (Neal &Walters, 2006). Underlying these dichotomies were rural identity processes of regulation, neighbor knowledge, and surveillance, which were linked to neighborhood watchfulness and knowledge sharing within the community. Transgender people in a rural area were likely to be quickly noticed if a member in a rural community suddenly begins wearing clothes and identifying themselves by an opposite sex pronoun, which emphasized the lack of anonymity and how quickly news of someone coming out would spread quickly. One of the goals of the current study was to explore how transgender people in a rural area regulate the flow of information and how they manage to maintain a sense of control over their identity while it is forming.

While empowerment and visibility interventions are often recommended when working with LGBTQ populations, (Association for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Issues in Counseling [ALGBTIC], 2009; Bockting et al., 2006; Carroll et al., 2002; Carroll & Gilroy, 2002; Clements-Nolle, Marx, & Katz, 2006), gender variant people in rural areas must weigh the balance of coming out and the social impact their decision will have on their lives and the lives of their friends and families (D'Augelli, 2006; Datti, 2012; Drumheller & McQuay, 2010; Eliason & Hughes, 2004; Kazyak, 2011; Palmer et al., 2012; Willging et al., 2006a, 2006b; Yost & Chmielewski, 2011). Living in a rural area is distinctly different for a transgender person compared to life in an

urban area for a transgender person. Managing social roles and identities may become more complex in rural areas because of the lack of anonymity and social enmeshment of lives. This web of social relationships was, in some ways, much less controllable in rural areas and required a different set of circumstances for a transgender person to decide to transition. Below is a figure representing the conceptual framework for this study (Figure 1).

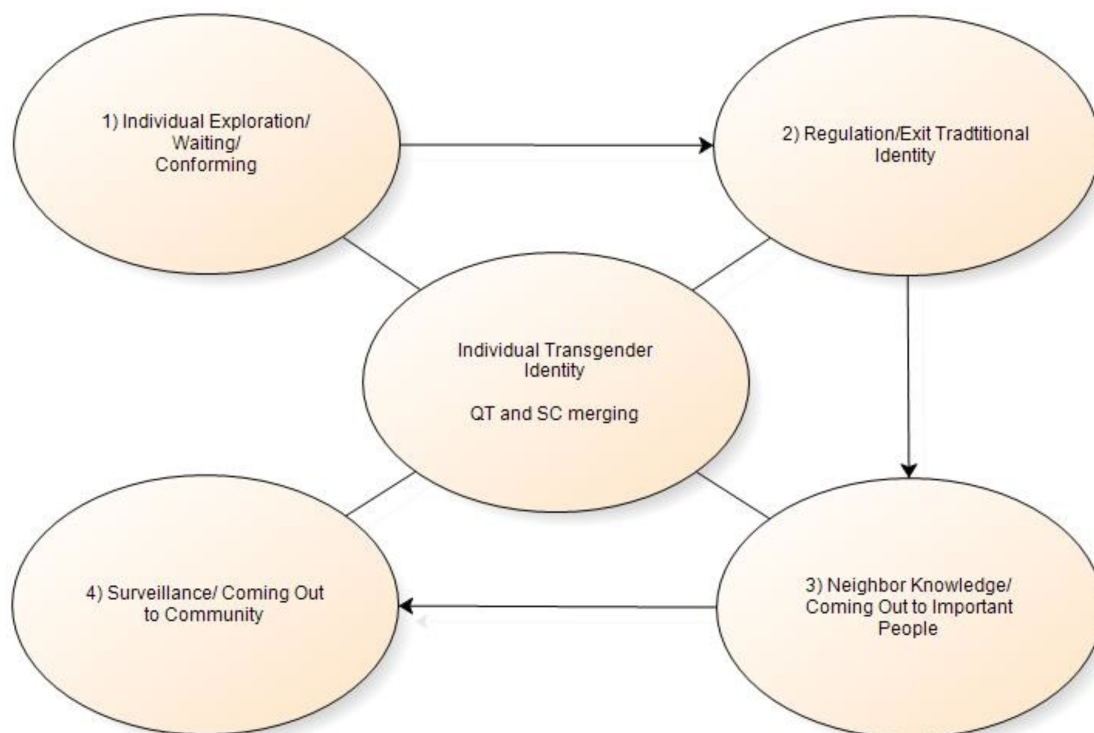

Figure 1. Rural Transgender Identity Development Model

In this diagram, four stages of coming out were represented in a stage-wise model. The hypothesis begins in the waiting/conforming stage, which was regulated through individual exploration of transgender culture, likely through Internet searches and secretive activities. In this stage, the person was not at a point where they can

integrate the idea that they may be a different gender than the one they were assigned at birth. This process was regulated through peer and social pressures. After a time of individual exploration, the person begins to experiment with different clothes and behaviors, which signifies the exit of the traditional identity and moves toward a transgender identity. In the second stage, the person was regulating when and where they engage in these behaviors, but still has not told anyone about the new identity. The third stage began as the person starts to come out to important people, such as close friends and family, which was regulated through neighbor knowledge. As the transgender person disclosed their new identity to their friends and family, those important people likely shared the knowledge among themselves within the social group. Lastly, as the transgender person began to transition, the secret was no longer possible and coming out to the community occurred, which was facilitated through surveillance whereby people in the community began to notice and talk amongst themselves and with people close to the individual. This process was linear in the community the transgender person lives in, but began again if the person moved to another rural community.

Literature Review Related to Key Concepts

Gender in Society

Sex and gender are pervasively woven into the fabric of sociocultural beliefs and practices on a daily basis to mean the same, when they are not interchangeable terms. Social norms of sex and gender have been identified as reinforced in early developmental stages of childhood and persevered into adulthood through gender expression of masculine or feminine (Diekman & Goodfriend, 2006; Fagot, Leinbach, & O'Boyle,

1992). Certain aspects of society are more gender-stereotyped than others, such as sports (Steinfeldt, Zakrajsek, Carter, & Steinfeldt, 2011), religion (Vincent, Parrott, & Peterson, 2011), social status (Bosson & Vandello, 2013), business (Lewis, 2006), and intra-family behaviors (Poeschl, 2008). This dichotomous view of gender has created what has been referred to in academic literature as 'gendered spaces' (Doan, 2007, 2010), which described how socially constructed norms of male and female behavior are reflected in designated physical spaces occupied by gender. Examples of gendered spaces were the typical American stereotype of the garage being a man's space and the kitchen being a woman's space.

Diekman and Goodfriend (2006) presented a comprehensive mixed methods study of gender role characteristics and the influence context has on gender. The authors identified the purpose of the study to understand how observers perceive social roles, specifically if observers perceived changes to prescriptive gender beliefs when they observed changes in gender roles. The literature review covered topics of how men and women have spent time with children and discussed the differences between descriptive beliefs (based in social role theory, beliefs about typical characteristics of men and women) and prescriptive beliefs (based in role congruity theory, beliefs that congruent gender role behavior was reinforced through social rewards). Social role theory and role congruity theory informed the framework of the study throughout. Experiment 1 sampled 244 students (115 women, 129 men) in a 2 X 2 (target sex x year) between-subjects factorial design (years were 1950, present year and 2050) as independent variables and 4 dependent variables: gender-stereotypic characteristics, context-specific evaluations, role

nontraditionalism beliefs, and demographics. Experiment 2 sampled 89 students (42 women, 47 men) who took part in a larger study and again used a 2 X 2 between-subjects factorial design (target sex X participant sex) as independent variables and 3 dependent variables: evaluation of trends, role nontraditionalism beliefs, and demographics. Experiment 3 sampled 79 students (29 women, 50 men) and was more qualitative in design. The participants read one of two short paragraphs describing evens in the small European country of Moldova in which occupational trends emphasized business competition or caretaking roles. Participants read one of the paragraphs and completed a dependent measures questionnaire that included an awareness check, role prevalence beliefs, gender-stereotypic characteristics, utility of characteristics, evaluation of characteristics, and demographics. The procedures were clearly spelled out and could be easily replicated. The researchers developed all the instruments and questionnaires used in the study, which diminishes some of the internal validity of the study, which was not discussed.

The first two experiments in the study were quantitative and supported the hypothesis that evaluation of gender role was perceived to vary by division of labor and was not affected by a motivation to adhere to traditional beliefs (Diekman & Goodfriend, 2006). The final experiment supported the prediction that any role system mediated the relationship between roles and positive evaluation that followed the changes implemented in the society. One of the limitations of the study was that the male-female gender dichotomy was reinforced by asking participants value-laden questions about stereotyped masculine and feminine behaviors. Another limitation of this study was that all the

participants were students from an undergraduate psychology course, and the results could be skewed based on the nature of the participants' beliefs about gender roles. Although the study has its limitations, the results supported the notion that role context was a primary evaluation function of prescriptive beliefs. Prescriptive beliefs were described in the paper as what men and women are ideally like, contrasted with descriptive beliefs that are about what men and women are usually like. Also, prescriptive and descriptive beliefs emerged from the social roles of the group and that the value of these behaviors extended beyond the boundaries of the role. For example, traditional feminine roles were valued more if they are masculinized and vice-versa. The conclusions were limited to the results of the study and the authors described limitations of the study at the end of the general discussion. This was an important study in that it supported the malleable nature of perceptions of and value regarded in gender roles, and that social change was not as difficult as previously perceived. Although the participants in this study were all from large Midwestern university psychology classes (and dissimilar to a rural population), the study highlighted that changes in gender roles can be positively interpreted in society. This study supported the concept that transgender people are able to transition and remain living in their rural home communities because the prescriptive beliefs of a gender role are mediated by role context, and therefore if a person declared they were transitioning from one gender to another the community might respond by altering the way they value the new behavior.

Gendered spaces is a relatively newer concept in social science literature, and has become more permeable outside of academia, such as larger urban areas with

communities of transgender people (Doan, 2007), and thus the boundaries of gendered spaces have become more flexible. A space may be labeled gendered by the symbolic meaning and functional purpose assigned to the space by the culture (Alexander, 2005; Doan, 2010; Dvorsky & Hughes, 2008; Sanger, 2008; Siebler, 2012). Restrooms were a primary example of gendered spaces where the terms *male* and *female* were assigned to physical spaces, and were potentially problem spaces for transgender people, among others such as public streets and elevators (Doan, 2010). These spaces were gender-based on how men and women were expected to express themselves in these spaces, and by defining appropriate spaces for men and women to be alone or coexist in. An extension of gendered spaces were referred to as queer spaces, and have developed as safe-zones within urban areas in which the community accepts cross-dressing and other gender variant expressions of LGBTQ life (Doan, 2007). Gender role stereotyping reinforced the function of gendered spaces to delineate where men and women spend the most time and defined appropriate behavior for men and women. In the rural areas the current study was conducted in, gendered spaces may be fixed and immutable, which created a need in a transgender person in a rural area to re-learn gender roles, the allowable spaces to move within that are divided by gender, and learned new ways of being and acting in the new worlds they inhabit in a different gender. The safe zones and queer spaces found in urban areas likely do not exist in rural areas and transgender people must find alternatives to safe zones to learn more about themselves without the benefit of a physical building filled with advocates and peers from whom to seek information and support.

In a qualitative study, Doan (2007) highlighted the experiences of transgender individuals and their perceptions of a variety of urban spaces, and ultimately revealed the gendered characteristics physical spaces can represent. Snowball sampling was used during the author's attendance at transgender conferences, namely the Southern Comfort Conference in 2000 (held in Atlanta, GA) and the Fourth International Congress on Cross-Dressing, Sex, and Gender in 2001 (held in Philadelphia, PA). Only 29% of the respondents in the study lived outside of urban or suburban areas. Data from a survey of 149 transgender individuals was used to describe the perceptions of transgender individuals in queer, urban spaces. The article did not clearly delineate a theoretical foundation to the study, but discussed queer and feminist theories throughout the body of the text. Although the analysis of the data was detailed, the author constructed the survey instrument but did not publish the instrument as part of the study; instead the results of the study were given in tables in which the questions are listed categorically and individually. The study concluded that most transgender people in the early stages of the coming out process sought some form of LGBTQ support group and/or pride events; both of which are more common in urban and suburban areas and nonexistent in rural areas. The author strongly argued the need for trans-friendly urban spaces because of the violence and harassment transgender people experienced in queer urban spaces, which the author described was a result of the perpetuation of gendered spaces. Although the study was conducted largely on an urban population, the fact that transgender individuals experienced harassment in queer urban spaces that are designed to be safe zones brings to

mind the level of harassment and violence transgender individuals in rural areas might experience without the safety of queer urban spaces.

Little research exists on the differences between rural and urban population attitudes toward gender role stereotyping, and there was disagreement in the literature that does exist. Much of the research that exists is cross-cultural research that supports the idea that gender role stereotyping is more common in urban areas in different cultures, such as Turkey (Kahraman & Başal, 2012) and Portugal (Poeschl, 2008), and was often reinforced by a mother's behavior toward her children (Kahraman & Başal, 2012; Poeschl, 2008).

Kahraman & Başal (2012) studied 200 children between the ages of 7 and 8 attending public school in Turkey; half of the sample included children from rural schools and the other half were from urban schools. The purpose of the study seemed clearly outlined in the beginning of the article in which the authors aimed to investigate differences in sex role between rural and urban children and the role education of the mother has on sex role stereotyped behavior in children in both environments. The literature review was minimal and there were several paragraphs in which studies were summarized in one sentence. The literature in the study was also outdated as many of the cited articles are from the 1970s and 1980s. The researchers employed a survey research method by administering the Sex Stereotypes Measure II, which was translated into Turkish and cultural modifications were also made to the instrument; there are four general research questions that are clearly identified. The procedures were described clearly, but the researchers translated and altered the survey instrument and did not

publish their version. The authors' results revealed that urban school children had stronger stereotyped views on sex role behavior than rural children; however, the study had some significant limitations. The primary limitation was that the instrument they used was developed in the late 1970s and was then translated and adapted to accommodate modern Turkish cultural knowledge and lexicon, which may have altered the reliability and validity of the instrument. The most alarming aspect of this study was that the authors made the assertion that this effect was

> …due to the progressive proliferation of gender disorders (homosexuality, transvestism, transsexualism, etc.) or the proliferation of unbiased approaches to sexual preference and the increase observed in the presence of adults making these different sexual preferences in big cities and in society than before… (Kahraman & Başal, 2012, p. 55).

The authors went on to recommend that parents begin to instill gender appropriate behaviors in children beginning at the earliest possible age by having children engage in tasks at home appropriate to their gender. The authors did not discuss the limitations or threats to validity of their own study and the conclusions seem to go beyond the scope of what the data will support. This study was included as a rival theory, which is often used in case study methodology (Stake, 1995; Yin, 2014), and highlighted how sex and gender are still considered fixed traits in academic studies of rural areas outside of the United States, making this a multicultural issue on several levels.

Another example of a study as a rival theory was similar to the one discussed above was conducted by Poeschl (2008), who published a multi-part study that included a

series of three experiments in northern Portugal on the attitudes of gender roles, opinions, and perceptions of fairness. The stated purpose of the research was to develop the notions that people actively comply with stereotyped gender role behaviors and rarely change them because upholding the traditional gender roles in the family benefits society. Poeschl includes more recent research than Kahraman & Başal (2012) from the paragraph above, but the literature review is still dated as a majority of the studies cited were conducted in the 1990s. No theoretical foundation was specified in the article, but the author discussed topics ranging from cave-man theories of division of labor to the development of Western societies in which women have moved into the workplace but continue to perform much of the domestic work in the family home. This study utilized survey research methodology.

Experiment 1 surveyed 193 married adults ages 35-61 years; Experiment 2 surveyed 109 unmarried adults ages 17-32 years; and Experiment 3 surveyed 221 unmarried, married, and divorced adults ages 18-31, 32-59, and 32-56, respectively (Poeschl, 2008). Each sample was divided evenly between men and women and spanned socioeconomic statuses of the culture. The author constructed all of the opinion surveys and also utilized the Social Dominance Orientation Scale in Experiment 2 and the Ambivalent Sexism Scale in Experiment 3. The author performed parametric tests (ANOVA, Cronbach's α, factor analysis and multiple regression in Experiment 1) on all the data in each of the studies. Although the author attempted to gather data from representative samples, the opinion scales were not published in the body of the article and were not clearly described, making replication nearly impossible. Also, the tests

performed on the data seemed inappropriate as all data were gathered using untested instruments, which the author did not test for reliability or validity prior to the current study. Poeschl described the results by making three assertions:

1. Traditional practices did not influence unequal family practices because they were social norms,
2. Individuals did not passively comply with traditional practices, but instead considered them fair, and
3. Normative family practices were considered fair by men and women because each benefited from traditional family organization (Poeschl, 2008, p. 69).

From reading the study, the author seemed to overstate the results of the analyses and made generalizations based on gender that did not seem to fit the data. Also, the use of researcher-constructed instruments as the primary data gathering instruments without first piloting each test seems premature to use them for such an elaborate study. The results of this study were in direct conflict with Diekman and Goodfriend (2006) in which adherence to traditional gender roles was not linked to a motivation to uphold traditional beliefs. These two rival theory studies did not fit with the concepts of self-determination or individual experience shaping identity drawn from queer and constructivist theory and are presented as rival theories that neglected transgender people as a population that requires flexibility in defining sex and gender.

In another study of prescribed gender roles in the United States, attitudes toward prescribed gender roles seemed to be more pronounced in younger girls, ages 6-8, compared to older girls, ages 10-12 in a rural, working-class environment (Meyer, 1980).

Meyer conducted a quantitative study with the purpose to examine three hypotheses drawn from cognitive-developmental theory and social learning theory. The first hypothesis expected to find that either the cognitive-developmental model or social learning model of sex-role socialization would prevail in the results. The second hypothesis expected to replicate other studies' results that girls' sex-role concepts were a function of several maternal variables, including socioeconomic class and employment. The third and final hypothesis expected to find that the most accurate measure of maternal sex-role identity was mother-daughter attitudinal similarity in sex-role fulfillment. Although the literature review is brief, it was succinct in describing cognitive-developmental theory and social learning theory, and ties both ideas into the study well. In this study, 150 girls divided by age into two groups, one included ages 6-8 and the second included ages 10-12, and their mothers were sampled from working-class families in rural Ohio. Seven measures were collected, namely 4 daughter measures of activities, female competence, work desire, and typical day collected via a 10-15 minute interview, and 3 mother measures of role prescriptions, aspirations, and socialization efforts collected in a single questionnaire. Cronbach's α data supported the internal consistency of the questionnaire while Pearson correlations were computed to measure intercorrelation of daughter measures, which were weak but significant ranging from -.03 to .63, and mother measures ranged from .20 to .44, however, most Pearson correlations were significant at $p < .05$ to $p < .001$ levels except for the typical day by female competence daughter measure correlation. An ANOVA was also run on the data and the results support the author's conclusions. Younger girls had significantly more sex-typed

role perceptions, while older girls' sex-role attitudes correlated with their mothers' sex-role attitudes. Attitudes of homemaker and working mothers were more similar than expected, but maternal role satisfaction seemed to have less influence on daughters' perceptions than predicted. This study illuminated the notion that sex-role stereotypes were ingrained in children at young ages, but that they changed over time based on the social environment they were raised in, and again supported the idea that prescribed gender roles are subject to interpretation based on context. This study also related to the rural environment in the current study as it was conducted in a rural, Midwestern state.

More recently, the results of a Spanish study revealed that gender role stereotypes seemed to diminish over the passage of time, but that gender role stereotypes remained stronger in rural versus urban areas (Garcia-Retamero, Müller, & López-Zafra, 2011). The purpose of this study was to answer a call for more research on gender stereotypes in varying demographic characteristics and the malleability of gender stereotypes over time. The literature review comprehensively covered gender stereotypes in the literature from several studies. Garcia-Retamero, et al. (2011) surveyed 371 individuals (49% men and 51% women) across eight regions of Spain and used participants as survey administrators who gathered data in their local communities. Survey administrators were trained to gather data that most approximated predetermined sociodemographic characteristics and to minimize nonresponse rates. Four hypotheses were clearly stated:

1. Participants will perceive male subjects as more masculine than female subjects and vice versa.

2. Participants will perceive female subjects as more masculine and less feminine over time, while perceiving male targets as less dynamic but slightly more feminine over time, culminating with the perception of more similarity over time of both sexes.
3. Urban participants will perceive female subjects as more masculine and less feminine than rural participants, and urban participants will perceive male subjects as more feminine and less masculine than rural participants, culminating with the perception of increasing similarity with increasing population size.
4. Participants will perceive increased similarity between male and female subjects from past to present to future regardless of population size.

The variables were well described and include perceptions of male and female participants of masculine and feminine characteristics over time and as a function of population size. The researchers computed multifactorial ANOVAs on all variables in progressively more complex ways, as reflected in the structure of the hypotheses. Target sex, year, population size and gender characteristic were independent variables, while participants' age, sex, and level of education were dependent measures. Results of the study supported the notion that people in rural areas had stronger perceptions of gender stereotypes compared to more urban areas, and that more similarity was perceived in urban areas over rural areas. This was significant to the current study as it highlighted again the nature of rural communities to hold onto traditional and more rigid gender role stereotypes, which could ultimately affect the identity development of a transgender

person while growing up and navigating a world that does not fit his, her, or hir internal experience.

Despite the conflicting studies, it was through the socially constructed gendered spaces that children developed into adults as gendered beings, and rural areas overall seemed to have stronger gender stereotypes than urban areas. Gendered spaces have permeated cultural practices and beliefs in such a fundamental manner that a gender-variant development trajectory can be a cause for concern for a transgender person (Doan, 2010). Simply put, as transgender individuals proceed through the normal developmental stages of human growth and development, there was a point in which an awareness develops that the individual's psychological gender did not match the biological sex assigned at birth, and that living in a rural area the person would have received stronger gender stereotyped messages as a child.

Linking queer theory and constructivism to the concept of gendered spaces (Doan, 2010) was logical in terms of self-determination and the fluid nature of gender, as well as the interaction between the individual and the environment in the formation of identity. Essentially queer theory supported the discovery process of a rural transgender person while constructivism supported the developmental trajectory of the identity development process of a transgender person in a rural area. The existence of gendered spaces and gender stereotypes were antithetical to queer theory, which supported a more feminist egalitarian philosophy of physical spaces in which spaces are genderless. People are social beings, though, and relate to their environment through categorizing people and concepts, which was how constructivism fits into the conceptual framework of this study.

From the research above, rural areas were likely to have strongly identified gendered spaces, which may present problems for a transgender person during his, her, or hir transition period when they have a place in both masculine and feminine worlds. Social constructivism theory supported the concept of gendered spaces created from masculine and feminine meaning assigned to the spaces, which were then internalized by members of the society as places where men go versus places where women go. This could present a challenge to a person transitioning from one sex to another and needs to be worked out within the person through individual experiences of navigating a new social environment as a different sex. The literature was nonexistent on how gender in society plays a role in transgender identity development, specifically in rural areas that seemed to have stronger identified gendered spaces than urban areas. Gender in society was an important aspect of relating context to experience of an individual transitioning from one sex to another in a highly dichotomized world, such as a rural community.

Gender Identity Development

Two theories emerged during a review of the literature that explained gender identity development beginning in childhood in general terms, but have not been applied to transgender people. The first was that the child began life with an unexplained true gender, which is then molded through bidirectional interactions between parents and children (Ehrensaft, 2011; Halim, Ruble, & Amodio, 2011; McHale, et al., 1999; Schachter & Ventura, 2008) and that this began at a very early age (Fausto-Sterling, 2012). A second theory was that biology determined gender in children and they try on various gender roles during childhood, which were influenced by adults and peers in their

environment to be gender-appropriate if the child deviated from prescribed gender roles (Lee & Troop-Gordon, 2011; Pleak, 2009; Smith & Leaper, 2005).

In a study conducted by McHale, Crouter, and Tucker (1999), the authors had two goals in mind, first to study children's attitudes, personality qualities, interests, and daily activities with respect to sex-typed behavior, and second to determine the extent sibling sex and family gender role attitudes had on sex-typed behavior. The literature review of the study was comprehensive and covered several previous studies across an extended time period. Gender role socialization was the guiding theory behind the study in terms of family dynamics and make up and how these factors influenced sex typing in children. The hypotheses, procedures, and instruments were clearly described and seemed to add to the rigor of the study. The participants were 200 firstborn children, mean age 10.4 years, their second-born siblings, mean age 7.7 years, and their parents, who were interviewed about their attitudes and personal characteristics, followed by seven telephone interviews that gathered data about the families' daily lives. The analyses affirmed that children's interests and activities were the most sex-typed behaviors, and that differences in sex typing between girls and boys were a function of the fathers' attitudes and sibling sex constellation. Peer interaction with same versus opposite sex boys and girls seemed unaffected by context. This knowledge was important to the current study in terms of how gender identity development begins in childhood at an early age and was mediated through interactions between the siblings and parents of a child. This study offered evidence that gender identity formation begins in the family at an early age. But this begs

the question that at some point a transgender person would have to renegotiate his, her, or hir own identity at a later age.

Gender identity developed in systems that reinforced gendered spaces and fostered a gender-binary society. Children and parents were both active and reflective participants in gender identity development during early to middle childhood (Halim et al., 2011; Schachter & Ventura, 2008). Schachter and Ventura (2008) published a theoretical article that emphasized the importance of developing a concept for drafting a comprehensive contextual theory of identity formation in adults. The authors supported the dialectical process of identity formation through integration and individuation in adolescents from a perspective of developmental psychology. Context, the authors argued, was just as important in the formation of identity as was the individual egocentric identity formation theories that currently exist. Context was at the heart of this study in terms of the adults living in a rural area moving through a developmental process of re-discovering their new identity as the opposite sex.

The bidirectional aspect of gender identity was such that children who expressed gender variant behaviors challenge parents' attempts at conformity and could be subject to psychological trauma because of their differing identity; while at the same time, parents became exposed to a new concept of gender identity and learned about it through their children's development (Ehrensaft, 2011). Ehrensaft discussed the risk transgender and gender nonconforming children experienced because they were in the social minority in school, but also in their homes and at risk of being rejected by their parents. This minority status can be easily extended to transgender adults in rural areas. Furthermore,

gender nonconforming youth must not only come out to friends and family (facing possible rejection) but also come to terms with the loss of their former selves as male or female before transitioning to their genuine self. There was still a need for more research on the effect of parenting and social norms on gender identity development, but evidence supports the theory that gender was consolidated at an early age of childhood (Fausto-Sterling, 2012). Fausto-Sterling labels Ehrensaft and other authors 'naturalists' in that they advocated for a theory of development in which the child possessed an unexplained true gender self that was shaped and influenced by culture and biology. It was therefore a logical assumption that gender identity development theory began at an early age, but if the development was delayed or arrested during childhood, the development occurred at a later age in an adult, and followed much the same trajectory. The current study examined this developmental process through discovery and experience in transgender adults living in a rural area and the means by which the developmental process occurs.

A gender nonconforming identity seemed to begin around the age of one and a half and two years, but can begin at any age throughout childhood and adolescence (Ehrensaft, 2011; Malpas, 2011; Pleak, 2009; Vanderburgh, 2009). The bidirectional relationship between parent and child also existed between children and their peers. In a recent longitudinal study, Lee and Troop-Gordon (2011) examined the hypothesis that peer disapproval led to an increase in gender role adherence. The authors set out to do a longitudinal study and collected data from 199 children, 104 girls, and 95 boys, and followed them for two years; the data for this particular study were gathered during the second year. The children all lived in midsized and rural communities in the upper

Midwest. The researchers maintained 172 (81.9%) participants over the duration of the study. The authors gathered data through self- and peer-report questionnaires. Confirmatory factor analysis, t-tests, Pearson correlations, and path analysis were used to test the data. Victimization was the independent variable of the study and was defined between two categories, namely overt (physical and emotional actions toward another student) and relational (social exclusion and avoidance). Victimization seemed to mediate gender variant behavior in adolescent girls who withdrew from masculine *and* feminine behaviors after victimization, while boys withdrew from feminine behavior only after physical, verbal, or general victimization; social exclusion in boys seemed to increase gender variant behavior (Lee & Troop-Gordon, 2011). The authors stated that the findings offered mixed support for the idea that negative peer treatment led to greater gender conformity. The results of this study were interesting in that it seemed when boys expressed feminine behavior, relational victimization seemed to increase adherence to the feminine behavior. If this dynamic was applied to adults living in a rural community, a newly out transgender person may be socially excluded and retreat to his, her, or hir own safe zones (home, friends' homes, etc.) and continue to explore the new identity. Also, the notion that gender variant behavior may trigger overt (physical and emotional) victimization was pertinent to the current study because of the potential for physical and emotional violence that transgender adults living in a rural area may experience from the community in which they are the only transgender person.

Children may often experiment with varying gender roles during play with other children, followed by a widening gap between genders around age eight to ten. There

was a growing belief that the primary gender expressed during puberty will not change much moving into adulthood. An adolescent may suppress his, her or hir gender expression because of social norm messages received from family and community, which may complicate the issue of when gender identity is solidified (Pleak, 2009). Smith and Leaper (2006) established that peer acceptance influences the relationship between perceived self-worth and gender appropriate behavior by examining 229 adolescents' (119 girls and 110 boys) responses to abridged versions of the Self-Perception Profile and the Multidimensional Gender Identity Inventory. The sample was drawn from coeducational summer sports camps in central California and included 119 girls and 110 boys from the ages of 12-17. One-way ANOVAs, Pearson correlations, cluster analysis, and Bonferroni's multiple comparisons procedure were all used in the analyses. The study highlighted the importance of context in relation to gender identity and social adjustment. Smith and Leaper revealed gender identity and self-worth were positively correlated in both boys and girls, and that there was no difference in self-worth of gender nonconforming and conforming adolescents if their peers accepted them. This study supported the notion that gender nonconformity does not necessarily lead to poor self-worth and that for the person going through the transition it can be a positive and affirming experience despite transphobia and negativity.

Transgender Identity Development Models

In this section, three transgender identity development models were described that, while adequate, do not fully capture the experiences of transgender people in rural areas. All of the models shared common conceptual threads, such as discovering a

difference in oneself regarding gender, a decision to come out, a transition process, and participation in a community (Bilodeau, 2005; Bilodeau & Renn, 2005; Bockting, Benner, & Coleman, 2009; D'Augelli, 1994; Diamond & Butterworth, 2008; Morgan & Stevens, 2008; Nuttbrock et al., 2009). While gender identity appeared to develop at an early childhood age, transgender identity development more commonly appeared in adolescence and adulthood (Bilodeau, 2005; Bilodeau & Renn, 2005; Bockting, Benner, & Coleman, 2009; Diamond & Butterworth, 2008; Morgan & Stevens, 2008; Nuttbrock et al., 2009). An analysis of each model was presented below to highlight the strengths and limitations of each model.

D'Augelli. The first model discussed in this section was D'Augelli's (1994) model of lesbian, gay and bisexual identity development that included sexual orientation and also gender identity. D'Augelli's model was based in a social context where simultaneous processes of identity development occurred through social interaction, namely self-concepts, relationship with family, and connections to peer groups and community. Six stages were described in this model that are nonlinear and develop independently:

1. Exiting the traditional identity,
2. Developing a personal identity,
3. Developing a social identity,
4. Becoming an *offspring*,
5. Developing an intimacy identity, and
6. Joining a community (Bilodeau, 2005; Bilodeau & Renn, 2005; D'Augelli, 1994).

D'Augelli's model began with a personal discovery that there was something different, followed by the development of several identities, i.e., personal, social, intimacy, and community. The model relied on the individual joining a community of other LGBTQ identified people and becoming what the author referred to as an 'offspring'. This process was described in terms of a mentor-mentee relationship in which a newly out LGBTQ person paired up with a more experienced LGBTQ person who provided guidance and integration into the LGBTQ culture. While D'Augelli's model presented a conceptual progression of transgender identity development, two aspects would not work in a rural area. Specifically, becoming an offspring and finding a community are much less readily available in a rural area; therefore, this model does not fit with the identity development process a transgender person in a rural area would experience. This process of becoming an offspring is likely never to occur in a rural area because there is probably no LGBTQ community to join, so a transgender person in a rural area will likely maintain pre-existing social supports and attachments to sustain social support during the transition phase.

In 2006, D'Augelli published a paper describing his own personal journey of developing a community of lesbian, gay, and bisexual people in a rural area that happened to include a major university. D'Augelli (2006) disclosed that in the absence of any identifiable social supports, he built his own social networks by turning to people he knew and trusted, and that coming out to more people was required to develop larger circles of social support (i.e., a community). This became a personal and professional struggle for the author in terms of a desire to be in a community, but also struggling

against the homophobia both on and off campus. Being self-motivated and coming out to build a community are common themes in the scant literature on rural LGBTQ issues, as this article discussed, but again this case study demographic falls on the campus of a large university, which is a community that is inherently different than a strictly rural area. D'Augelli's model provided a comprehensive developmental identity model of transgender people, but the participants in the study were university students who lived in a geographic area that had a community of transgender people to meet and socialize with. This dissertation expanded on this and other identity development models in an understudied population of transgender people who lived in rural areas and lacked access to a community in which to become socialized.

Bilodeau (2005) later applied D'Augelli's (1994) model specifically to transgender identity development and found many similarities. Bilodeau interviewed two transgender-identified students who attended a large Midwestern public university that had a strong LGBTQ support network of groups on campus. The two participants in the study identified with each stage of D'Augelli's developmental model and provided specific examples of how their experiences aligned with the model. Both of the students cited that their connection to the on-campus LGBTQ groups provided both a social outlet and an opportunity to explore affectional relationships within their new identities. This study supported the idea that gender variant people experience a similar identity development process when compared to sexual orientation identity development models. The limitation of this study was that, again, it was conducted on the campus of a large Midwestern university, which fosters identity communities such as LGBTQ networks and

social supports. The participants in the study explained that the university atmosphere allowed them to explore their identities and follow the developmental trajectory outlined in D'Augelli's work. This study supported the replication of D'Augelli's (1994) model; however, it was conducted on a large college campus. There was still a lack of representation of rural communities in which transgender people live and transition without the social support afforded a college campus population. Bilodeau's study was also limited to the experiences of two students at a large Midwestern college campus that possesses a large support network of LGBTQ on-campus groups, and the effect of an academic environment on identity development. This experience would be far removed from the identity development experience of a transgender person in a rural area that lacked the progressive thinking found in an academic environment or the large support network of LGBTQ groups.

In another publication that same year, Bilodeau and Renn (2005) presented a much more comprehensive literature review and identified several of the limitations of prior research on gender and sexual orientation identity development. Some of the limitations identified by Bilodeau and Renn (2005) were a lack of developmental conceptual frameworks because of a focus of LGBTQ adults reflected back on their own identity development and coming out processes, a focus on stage wise models, the lack of integrating multiple and intersecting identities, and the pressure of developing a single model to describe complex social processes. The authors asserted that until new models that incorporated definitions of transgender identities, medical perspectives, and feminist/queer theory perspectives, a humanistic developmental model of transgender

identity development is yet out of reach, especially in terms of adolescent identity development. This logic can also be extended to rural transgender populations in which there was a lack of research or theoretical models that fully describe the experiences of transgender people living in a rural area.

Morgan and Stevens. Morgan and Stevens (2008) also conducted a qualitative study of transgender-identified participants from another Midwestern university community. The purpose of the study was to raise awareness of the lived experiences of transgender people in the field of nursing. The findings of this study are part of a larger qualitative study that explored the lives of 11 transgender participants. The focus of the publication was on four FTM participants from the larger qualitative study. The authors, who are both nurses, examined the lived experiences of the four FTM participants through a postmodern feminist theoretical orientation. The authors revealed four categories of development, namely (a) transgender identity recognition, acknowledgement, and development; (b) bodily experiences; (c) relationships with others; and (d) health care experiences. Four themes emerged from the semi-structured interviews based on the experiences of the participants; these included a) body-mind dissonance, b) biding time, c) missed opportunities, and d) process of transition. These findings are described in more detail below.

Morgan and Stevens (2008) described body-mind dissonance as the first known memory for a transgender person when the experience of the physical body and the psychological identity did not match. Each participant experienced dissonance at important milestones during early childhood and puberty. The participants in the study

explained that once puberty started they felt as though their clothes were imposed on them and did not match the internal experience of their gender. This extended to other activities such as sports and other childhood activities. A growing cognitive dissonance occurred over time as the participants aged into adolescence and they felt pressured to conform, but also a desire to be genuine. A period of biding time followed puberty into early adulthood when the participants described they were simply waiting for the right time to act on their feelings. During this time, a series of missed opportunities generally occurred where the participants went through the customary developmental milestones of getting married, having children, and building a life that was expected. The participants explained there were times when they could have decided to move away from expectations, but found themselves conforming to the social norms. Transition was generally the result of reaching a breaking point in each of their lives after the accumulation of missed opportunities.

Morgan and Stevens (2008) clearly outlined the limitations of study, such as the irregularity of recalled events and a lack of generalizability of the data. The authors did mention that the depth and richness of the data did meet the standard of transferability in qualitative research. The participants in this study were also well connected to the LGBTQ community and the authors note that this may have influenced the experiences of the participants. This model more accurately described the identity development process in terms of individual experience and did not require an individual to interface with a larger transgender community. The aspect of the breaking point was interesting in that transgender people, in a rural area, may feel as though they are at a breaking point,

but this did not occur because there was no catalyst to push them toward expressing this identity due to of the lack of visible transgender messages in the social environment. This model likely came closer to describing the stages and experiences a transgender person in a rural area goes through during the identity development process. The process that Morgan and Stevens described was included in the conceptual framework in terms of negotiating the coming out process before and after discovery of the new identity. This model presented the concepts that a transgender person feels something was different, recognized a difference privately, reached a point in which they feel they must be more genuine, and then the person came out and transitioned. This simplified process was common to all members of the LGBTQ community, but the context and individual experiences of rural transgender people were qualitatively different that those who live in urban areas, which was the aim of the current study.

Veal, Lomax, and Clarke. Veale, Lomax, and Clarke (2010) presented a hybridized identity development model of gender identity development based on two previous theories of gender nonconformity, namely Docter's Five-Stage Theory of Cross-Gender Behavior and Blanchard's Theory of Autogynephilia Development. These two foundational theories originated in the late 1980s as transgenderism was becoming more visible. Docter (1988) described two variations of transgender women based in gender dysphoria and how primary and secondary functions of cross-dressing included a desire to be the opposite sex, and later in life after a man attempted to live in the male gender role, but then transitioned to a female. The fundamental flaw in Docter's theory was that he combined heterosexual transvestism into the identity development of a transgender

identity, and placed it in the early stages of his identity development model. This approach was inconsistent with other transgender identity development theories as there are no such stages in which a person is sexually aroused by dressing as the opposite gender, which then led to a desire to be the opposite gender. Blanchard coined the term autogynephilia as an attempt to describe a man's sexual arousal of thinking of himself as female, and that this was more in line with transvestitism than transgender behavior. Blanchard's theory was predicated on the assumption that transgender women began as men who have a sexual desire to look and dress like women, which eventually led to a change in identity from male to female. Blanchard has been criticized for his focus on sexual attraction of being the opposite sex versus a desire to live as the opposite sex. Moser (2010) outlined several problems with Blanchard's autogynephilia theory in terms of language, categorization issues, the exclusion of non-homosexual male-to-female transgender individuals, as well as gay men and lesbians, and the notion that transgender women who denied these feelings were striving to appear more socially acceptable. Nuttbrock, Bockting, Mason, Hwahng, Rosenblum, and Macri (2011) conducted their own study using Blanchard's autogynephilia by assessing 571 transgender MTFs in New York City using the Life Chart Interview. The authors found contrary evidence that transvestic fetishism was observed across subtypes of non-homosexuals and that linear (opposed to curvilinear) associations were revealed along a continuum of gynephilia and transvestic fetishism (Nuttbrock, et al., 2011).

The identity-defense model was born out of two models that encompassed the biological propensity and a psychological desire to be the opposite sex by accounting for

degrees of gender variance based on a function of defense mechanisms. Although the identity-defense model presented more variation in gender variance outcomes, some of the outcomes do not fall in line with rural life such as drag artist and nonclassical transsexual. Because the identity defense model incorporated such flawed theories from Docter and Blanchard, the theory itself is therefore flawed to the core. No other model was found during the literature review that focused solely on sexual attraction of the opposite sex leading to the desire to become the opposite sex. This model did not fit in any way into the queer theory or social constructivist conceptual framework of this study, but it is important to include a range of identity development models in the literature review to provide context of the current theoretical environment of transgender identity development. This model was significant to this study because it was one of the only models found during the literature review that includes the influences from environmental factors in the identity development model, which in this case was extended to include the psychosocial context of the community in which the transgender person resides. The table below summarizes the three theories described above.

Table 1

Comparison of Identity Development Models

Model	Stages in Each Model
D'Augelli, 1994	a) Exiting the traditional identity b) Developing a personal identity c) Developing a social identity d) Becoming an offspring e) Developing an intimacy identity f) Joining a community
Morgan & Stevens, 2008	a) Body-mind dissonance b) Biding time c) Missed opportunities d) Process of transition
Veale, Lomax & Clark, 2010	a) Biological factors b) Early childhood influences c) Degree of gender-variant identity d) Environmental factors e) Personality factors f) Defense mechanisms

The Culture of Online Communities

Technology has been utilized by the LGBTQ community since the 1980s, primarily because of the anonymity online communication allows, and the ability for people who are geographically isolated to be involved with a larger community (Finlon, 2002). Online communities include such venues as discussion boards, chat rooms, social networking sites, and transgender themed websites (Rosser, Oakes, Bockting, & Miner, 2007). Technology has been advancing at a significant pace and researchers in social sciences must come to recognize that online and Internet communities are functional and

have similar qualities as real communities (Argyle & Shields, 1996; Horvath, Iantaffi, Grey, & Bockting, 2012; Knopf, 2008; Prior & Miller, 2012; Rak, 2008; van Eeden-Moorefield, Proulx, & Pasley, 2008). Rural communities often have access to the Internet that provides them with a glimpse into a world larger than their own, but the members of the community remain in control as far as what and how much information they access through electronic sources.

Internet technology has also been used more recently in social science research. Prior and Miller (2011) discussed a methodology they described as *webethnography* in which ethnographic research was conducted on virtual communities. The processes remained the same as traditional ethnographic approaches, although the researcher became a participant-observer in an online community instead of a geographic community. The authors cautioned that this type of research should be done where most of the interactions of the community occur online, and if there was a significant level of interaction offline then the data must be triangulated with offline activities. Other researchers discussed using online communities for interview data, focus groups and survey data (Rosser et al., 2007; van Eeden-Moorefield et al., 2008).

There appeared to be a debate in the literature on the effect online communities have on the physical body presence on the Internet. Argyle and Shields (1996) first discussed this where they assert that there was no loss of body through online communication. The authors, in fact, stated the opposite, that the primary function of the online community was to facilitate multiple identities at once, which were created solely by the user. This allowed the user to express his, her, or hir virtual body in a manner that

was in line with their self-perception of their own bodies. Conversely, Dvorksy and Hughes (2008) argue exactly the opposite in an article written twelve years later, namely that technology was eroding the physical body, specifically the traditional gender binary construct, and moving toward a new philosophy of postgenderism. Dvorsky and Hughes defined postgenderism as moving past gender to a place where gender identity is moot and not discussed in online interactions, resulting in the loss of the physical presence in online communication. This argument seemed to emphasize the fact that someone who created a profile on an Internet forum or website must choose a gender to be expressed, either male or female. This forced choice is inconsistent with the fluid nature of gender as interpreted through queer theory or social constructivism regardless of where the person was present, e.g., online versus physical world. Therefore, online communities that allowed users to create profiles allowed users to meld together several identities, gender being one among many different potential identities, were more fluid in identity expressions, or building in the ability for multiple gender types, such as transgender or gender-less. The self-determination quality of these online communities and resources fits with the queer theory and social constructivism theoretical foundations of the current study.

The possibility of connecting with a larger community while physically residing in a rural community was potentially beneficial to a transgender person and their identity development process. Once a transgender person in a rural area discovered their identity, they must turn somewhere or to someone for guidance, and they will likely seek out several resources for assistance, such as medical and mental health professionals, peers,

and any other resource they can find. The online communities may provide a beacon of hope and essential information specific to transgender life that cannot otherwise be accessed. This ability to connect with others may reduce isolation and improve social connections during the discovery and experiential phases of identity development, ultimately facilitating the identity development process by becoming the transgender community discussed previously in transgender identity development models.

Transgender Literature

One of the most controversial areas of gender identity development is literature that contained transgender themes and/or characters in main roles (Abbott, 2009; Blackburn & Smith, 2010; Crisp, 2009; North, 2010). This controversy was manifested in many ways. In one recent study, Hughes-Hassell, Overberg, and Harris (2013) found that high school libraries are proportionately deficient in LGBTQ-themed literature for LGBTQ-identified students based on the student population (Hughes-Hassell, Overberg, & Harris, 2013). As well as other articles that discussed the lack of inclusivity in schools and other institutions of gender-variant options, creating artificial forced choices for those who identify as transgender (Blackburn & Smith, 2010; Brimberry, 2011). There was also disagreement among LGBTQ groups in regards to how LGBTQ themes and characters were represented within literature. In an essay, Norton (2000) described the lack of visibility of women, particularly transgender women, while fiction books with LGBTQ-themed titles have been dramatically increasing every year since the year 2000 (Manfredi, 2009).

LGBTQ literature has evolved over a 50-year period from stereotyping and derogatory language to complex relationships and affirmative messages couched in honest discussions between main characters struggling with identity issues (Greenblatt, 2011). LGBTQ literature, particularly transgender literature, has become itself a political tool for simply existing because of the sociology of the current gender binary system (Brimberry, 2011; Gherovici, 2010). The themes contained in LGBTQ literature appear to have evolved into a supportive tone for people who are beginning to question or explore sexuality and gender and how these identities co-mingle. Transgender literature may be an important part of the discovery process for a person who first realize they are experiencing something real and not an illusion. Aside from online resources, transgender literature may provide information about this new identity and culture that the person is trying to learn as much about as they can. Reviewing literature is also something that can be done privately in a person's home via online literature or ordering books from online retailers and having the books shipped in generically packaged boxes.

Health Considerations

Transgender individuals experience many of the same health conditions that cisgender people experience, but they also experience additional medical issues unique to the transition process of changing sex (Burrows, 2011; Mizock & Fleming, 2011; Persson, 2009; Wolf & Dew, 2012). Mental health counselors play an important role in the transition experience of a transgender person from one sex to another (Carroll et al., 2002), particularly in terms of diagnostic considerations. Recently the diagnostic label of Gender identity disorder has been replaced with gender dysphoria in the 5th edition of the

Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (American Psychiatric Association, 2013) after much criticism from the professional community (Bouman et al., 2010; Corneil, Eisfeld, & Botzer, 2010; Drescher, 2010). This change of the diagnostic category aligns better with the process of developing a transgender identity by allowing counselors and other mental health professionals to capture the psychological discomfort a gender-variant person feels and not pathologize the transgender identity itself. This shifts the focus of gender affirmation treatment to more medically focused care instead of primarily psychiatrically focused.

People who identified as transgender also sometimes struggle with mental illness (Bockting et al., 2006; Mizock & Fleming, 2011) and substance use disorders (Wolf & Dew, 2012) in many of the same ways that non-transgender people do. A recent study highlighted this very point and reinforced the urgency that transgender competent therapists in rural areas are needed now more than ever (Horvath, Iantaffi, Swinburne-Romine, & Bockting, 2014) The addition of social pressures of conforming and suppressing a preferred gender identity could contribute to the stresses associated with mental illness and substance use disorders. Counselors who work with this population need additional education and supervision in order to develop a sufficient competence level to provide good services (ALGBTIC, 2009; Bockting et al., 2006; Mathy, 2001; Sperber, Landers, & Lawrence, 2005, Vanderburgh, 2009).

Mizock and Fleming (2011) presented a case study that demonstrated the variation of gender identity issues among people with chronic mental illness. The authors noted that the psychiatric community has, in the past, classified gender dysphoric feelings

in people experiencing psychosis as delusional thinking; which is a limiting perspective in terms of identity development. The manner in which these feelings were dealt with by professional staff has been to distract and deny the person's ability to express themselves, which the authors showed heightens distress and interfered with the collaborative approach to treating mental illness. Mizock and Fleming discussed four cases in which people were undergoing inpatient psychiatric care had presented to treatment because of gender dissonance in their lives that led them to experience some form of psychosis. The limited nature of case study design makes it difficult to extrapolate the data to larger populations, but the cases all came from populations that appear in social science research, e.g. veterans, homeless, college student, and a construction worker from a rural area, and it could be presumed that another person in a similar situation may have a similar reaction to the cases presented. The cases were developed well and the data presented were rich in detail.

Wolf and Dew (2012) reviewed several studies from the existing literature that have shown male-to-female transgender persons have higher rates of substance abuse, which can be the result of societal factors such as discrimination, unemployment, or homelessness. The research the authors reviewed took place from the 1990s to the early 2000s and was often funded by HIV/AIDS financial sources. Many of the studies were community-based investigations of male-to-female transgender persons who underwent alcohol and other drug (AOD) screenings. Three primary issues that the authors discussed were social stigmatization, transphobia, and genderism, any of which individually or

conjointly, could increase the risk of a transgender person turning to drugs and alcohol to cope.

Even less literature exists on the opposite end of the life span spectrum and the unique issues related to aging transgender people. Some of the challenges for aging transgender people that were identified by Persson (2009) were inadequate healthcare, social support, and legal obstacles. The lifespan development of gender begins at a very early age and continues throughout the person's life as a struggle against gender binary normative constructs of the world. More research is necessary among the aging transgender population to identify the barriers and issues unique to this population as well as the rural transgender population.

Summary and Conclusions

The literature reviewed above provides a glimpse of the disagreement between gender roles in society and the individual experience of gender in a person. In rural areas in particular, societal gender roles are sometimes rigid and strongly reinforced. Gender is part of a larger identity that begins to form early in life, between one to three years, and continues to form through adolescence. Gender is reinforced in the physical environment through gendered spaces in which only men or women are allowed.

There are several models of transgender identity development; three of which are discussed in this literature review. These three models fall short in certain areas if they are applied to rural areas that do not have burgeoning transgender communities. In the technological age that currently exists, one logical conclusion of this problem is that once individuals discover their transgender identity they turn to the Internet to explore the new

identity. Online communities may play a vital role in identity development of transgender people in rural areas.

There is a dearth of studies or empirical data on transgender identity development as it is facilitated through online communities or through the use of literature. The studies that have been done combine transgender people in with sexual orientation and do not cover online communities or rural areas. This study aimed to highlight the unique experiences of rural transgender people and how they developed their identities while living in a rural area through interaction in online communication. Online communities and literature can provide a wealth of knowledge and transmit experience and cultural elements to a person after the discovery of the new identity. What is known from past studies on transgender identity development is that once a person discovers a new gender identity, the person begins a process of exploring the new identity and experimenting trying on the new identity (Bilodeau, 2005; Bilodeau & Renn, 2005; D'Augelli, 1994; Morgan & Stevens, 2008; Veale, Lomax, & Clark, 2010). At some point also, the person will likely seek out others like themselves to learn more about the identity and the process of transitioning to the new identity. This process may be stifled in a rural area in which there is a complete lack of transgender information or culture.

The present study addressed this gap in the knowledge by examining the process of identity development in transgender people who live in rural areas. The participants were individuals who have discovered their identity, transitioned, and continue living in rural areas. An assumption that may be untrue is that people who are transgender and live in rural areas often flock to more urban centers of culture to explore and experiment with

the new identity in a safe environment. My own personal and professional experiences with this population have demonstrated that relocation is not always practical or necessary and that a person can develop a healthy transgender identity and transition while living in a rural area.

This study extended the knowledge of transgender counseling services by providing a new point of view from a highly hidden and vulnerable population that is overlooked in the literature. A basic academic database search of the combined terms transgender and online communities yielded no studies on this topic specifically. This demonstrated a lack of empirical data on this topic, which warrants the need for a qualitative study to investigate the experiences of transgender people living in a rural area and also to describe a process that is understudied and not well understood. The methodology of the study is described in detail in Chapter 3.

Chapter 3: Research Method

Introduction

In this study, I explored the context and lived experiences of four transgender individuals living in a rural area who accessed online communities and literature during their identity development process. The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to increase the knowledge of how the identities of transgender people develop in rural areas where information about transgender people is scant. I used the multiple case study approach to provide in-depth documentation of the lived experiences among a few rural transgender people and how they acquired knowledge about people like themselves. I intended to shed light on how transgender people in rural areas acquired and integrated knowledge about transgender culture into their own identities despite a lack of obviously visible transgender culture in their environment. This research can be used to inform professional counselors of the unique experiences of transgender people living in rural areas by providing insight into identity development in a vulnerable and hidden population. Additionally, transgender persons living in a rural area now have a voice where they have not had one before, and their stories can influence professional counseling services they receive.

The research design and rationale are described in detail in this chapter, as well as the role of the researcher and the proposed methodology. Issues of trustworthiness such as credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability are discussed as they relate to quality in qualitative research studies. This chapter is a guide to the methodology

of the study and operationalizes the study in line with current qualitative methods and procedures.

Research Design and Rationale

The decision to use a multiple case study methodology stemmed from the lack of literature on this topic and the sensitive nature of transgender people living in a rural environment. Case study methodology is currently more acceptable as a form of critical inquiry and has gained traction in academia as a vetted method of research design (Flyvbjerg, 2011; Yin, 2014). Common misconceptions about case study design are that theoretical knowledge is more valuable than concrete case study knowledge, and there is an inability to generalize from a case study, a case study design is a pilot method used in the development of a quantitative study, there is a bias toward verification, and that the knowledge can be applied to general populations (Flyvbjerg, 2011; Stake, 1995; Yin, 2014). However, generalizations can be refined over time and through replication of case studies (Stake, 1995). Yin (2014) outlined three conditions for the use of case study research, such as the type of research question (contextual, how/why questions), no researcher control over behavioral events, and a focus on contemporary issues; this study met these three criteria. The aim of the study was to understand the context of how a transgender person in a rural area discovered his, her, or hir identity and how the experiences they have during transition impacted identity development. In this work, as the researcher, I had no control over the context or environment that the participants lived in or how they interacted socially with others; the topic is a contemporary issue that is

understudied and underrepresented in the literature. This meets the necessary criteria to warrant a case study for this topic.

Case study research has specific steps in carrying out a study that link research questions with the units of analysis and identifying criteria for the definition of a case and how the case is treated. Yin (2014) outlined a research design paradigm for case study research by following five steps: (a) developing appropriate research questions, (b) stating any propositions, (c) identifying units of analysis, (d) linking data to the propositions and research questions, and (e) establishing criteria for interpreting the findings. In this study, I used the research questions to establish the context of life for a transgender individual who lived in a rural area, how they discovered this identity, and the methods and tools they used to learn more about this new identity. The propositions in this study are found in the conceptual framework in which I proposed that transgender people living in a rural area discovered and learned about their transgender identity through online resources and literature in the absence of a transgender (or LGB) community. I posited that identity development begins with discovery of a transgender identity and proceeds through individual constructivist ontology in a coming out process unique to rural communities. The units of analysis included documentation (websites, literature, social media, etc.), interview data, physical artifacts, participant observations, and an art project completed by the participants, all of which were collected during prolonged exposure and multiple contacts with the participants in an environment of their choosing. All data analyses and linking of the data to the research questions were

completed in Chapters 4 and 5. The qualitative data analysis methods that were used in this study appear later in this chapter.

Research Questions

Include a topic sentence. Creswell (2009, 2013) explained that qualitative studies begin with one or two broad central questions followed by five to seven subquestions. In case study research, the development of research questions begins with identifying an issue and then building research questions from the issue to develop the embeddedness of the issue within the context (Stake, 1995; Yin, 2014). For this study, two central questions and several issue and topical subquestions were investigated. The research questions listed below have changed over time after consultation with the dissertation committee through an iterative process. These questions were intended to provide answers about how the identity development process for transgender people who live in rural communities began and proceeded, and how identity development was shaped or impacted by online resources and literature. The presumption was that transgender people who live in rural communities discovered a transgender identity, followed by accessing information through online resources because of the lack of social support in their environment (i.e., LGBTQ support groups, transgender social networks, etc.). This process was followed by a coming out process that was unique to the context of a rural area and social attachments.

Central Questions

1. How does a transgender person discover his, her, or hir identity in a rural area that lacks any obvious transgender cultural information?

2. What are the experiences a transgender person goes through in his, her, or hir search for an individual transgender identity in a rural area?

Issue Subquestions

1. How do transgender people find information on transgender culture in a rural area?
2. What value does engaging in online activity provide transgender people in rural communities?

Topical Subquestions

1. How often and what online resources do transgender people access?
2. What are some of the online resources transgender people use to learn more about themselves?
3. What are some experiences that transgender people have in the rural communities where they live?
4. What types of online interactions do transgender people engage in a rural area?

Central Concepts and Phenomenon

In this study, I explored the lived experiences of four transgender people living in a rural area, specifically, the role online communities played in the identity development of a transgender person in a rural area. The theoretical approach for this dissertation included queer theory and social constructivism, as discussed in Chapter 2. Queer theorists posit the concepts of gender fluidity and focus on individual identity and self-determination (Brown, 2012; Creswell, 2013; Garry, 2011; Hill, 2007; McNeil, 2010;

Olive & Thorpe, 2011). Queer theorists also challenge the current gender binary world that transgender people struggle to fit into, allowing for multiple definitions of gender and sexual orientation (Goldner, 2011). Individual self-determination is paramount in the development of transgender identity and allowed me to identify participants for the study as they self-identified as transgender.

Queer theory was also tied closely to social constructivism in this study. The interpretive lens for this dissertation was constructivist in terms of the interpersonal and institutional microaggressions a person experiences in daily life, which are influenced by each person's multiple identities (Sue, 2010). Additionally, queer theory provided the necessary self-determination philosophy guiding the study, while the knowledge that was generated by the interactions between researcher and participant were constructivist in nature (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). The framework related to the key research questions in terms of how transgender people in rural areas discovered their transgender identity and the extent of the influence the various communities (online and rural) had on the individual. I explained how a transgender person in a rural area came to alter his, her, or hir identity and presented this new identity to the world through interpersonal interaction. Also, I explored how a transgender person navigated discrimination and microaggressions in daily life they experienced for being different from the rest and managing inner conflict between what his, her, or hir desire to transition and the social pressure to avoid transitioning. The conceptual framework is discussed previously in Chapter 2.

Role of the Researcher

My role in this study was that of a participant-observer of the experiences of others, and the primary investigative tool of qualitative research. Queer theory is based in empowerment and giving a voice to people who experience various forms of oppression and discrimination. In this sense, this study provided the participants with a voice that has not been heard in academic literature up to this point: the rural transgender person. Social constructivism posits that all people create a mental representation of the social reality of culture and society. This research documents the sociocultural reality of transgender people who maintain lives in rural areas without flocking to large cities to find a welcoming community. This case study intended to capture the challenges and successes of the participants in their personal journey after discovery and throughout the transition process while living in a rural area.

The idea for this study came from my clinical experiences working with transgender people where the practice is located. After seeing several transgender clients in my practice, I was surprised to see that each person progresses through his or her transition without moving to a more populated urban setting where transitioning may have been easier with a connection to a larger transgender community. The clients I worked with all explained that they had discovered, and established online relationships with other transgender people, and they felt a connection to a larger community without the need to move to physically relocate. Through these observations, I was interested in investigating what it was about the online communities that influenced my clients'

identity development and how their online experiences compared with their real-life experiences during transition.

My own experience in the LGBTQ community is that of a participant, being a gay man living in a semi-rural area. The area in which I originally grew up and came out in was extremely rural and about an hour's drive from where I currently live. I have a long history of involvement in this LGBTQ community as an advocate, social participant, and activist. Further, the participants I sought out were not previous clients or friends. Because of my connection with the community, I was able to locate a gatekeeper of the community, who is a person who is familiar with transgender people in the area, and provided a connection to the community in which to advertise the study.

I identify as a gay man, which is a personal orientation bias that needs to be managed in order to maintain trustworthiness and credibility of the study. The role of queer theory in my own life means that I am empowered to follow my own self-determined path and tell my story as I experience it. In this way I carry multiple identities as being male, Caucasian, mid-30s in age, non-Christian, married, employed, middle-class, computer/technology literate, and able-bodied; in addition to being gay. Another potential source of bias is that I have also experienced a similar situation in my own sexual orientation identity development growing up in a very rural part of an already rural state, and the lack of any identifiable gay culture affected my own development. I came out during the increase in technology that utilized Internet connections, and I found a haven of gay culture and life in online communities that I did not find in my own real environment. I also chose to seek out literature written by gay authors, both fiction and

non-fiction, to learn more about gay culture. Because of these experiences, the need to control bias is important to address. In order to control for this, I developed a brief set of interview questions with my dissertation committee, which I completed by writing out the answers in paragraph form, which were then emailed to the dissertation committee chair for review of content, bias, and reasoning. The questions and answers were published in Chapter 5. The self-interview questions are listed below:

1. How will I know if a question I ask a participant is free of assumptions from my own experience living in a rural area?
2. What assumptions do I have about transgender identity development?
3. Where did I find information during my own identity development process?
4. How do I avoid assuming younger transgender people are as equally computer literate as I am?
5. Do I assume that older transgender people are less computer literate and will not have an online presence?

Methodology

Participant Selection Logic

The population for this study included transgender people living in a rural area of a Midwestern state. This area of the state is sparsely populated as a whole; the population of the 26 counties that make up this geographic area is estimated at 625,459 across more than 11,000 square miles (State of Michigan, 2013). The World Professional Association for Transgender Health (WPATH, 2012) estimates that between 1:11,900 and 1:45,000 biological men identify as transgender women (male-to-female) and between 1:30,400

and 1:200,000 biological women identify as transgender men (female-to-male). These data are based on people who seek treatment and come from studies published around the globe. Based on this data, one would expect to find between 3 and 53 transgender individuals in this geographic area. Alternatively, the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* recently released a 5th edition and the prevalence rates for MTFs range from 0.005% to 0.014%, while FTMs range from 0.002% to 0.003% (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). Given the population data above, this translates to 31 to 88 MTFs and 13 to 19 FTMs in this region of Michigan based on DSM-V prevalence data, which is an underreported measure based on how many transgender people seek hormonal or surgical treatment options.

I used purposeful sampling to achieve the desired cases within the required boundaries, which are that the participants are over 18 years of age, identifies as either MTF or FTM transgender, lives in a rural area, discovered their identity while living in the rural area and went through the transition process in the same area. Purposeful sampling provided me with the tools to choose cases that meet certain criteria for the case study (Creswell, 2013; Miles & Huberman, 1994; Patton, 2002). Purposeful sampling is often used in case study research to achieve the desired cases that fall within the boundaries of the research study (Stakes, 1995; Yin, 2014).

I included four cases in the study based on multiple case study and qualitative data collection norms (Creswell, 2009, 2013; Stake, 2006; Yin, 2014), specifically two MTF cases and two FTM cases to achieve representation across the transgender identity. Multiple case studies should utilize at least four, but less than ten, cases to provide

meaningful data and avoid any limitations in data analysis (Stake, 2006). I recruited four participants by selecting two key informants from the transgender community. One of the key informants was the leader of Transgender Michigan, a Michigan based transgender advocacy group that has been helping trans-identified people in Michigan for over 15 years. This informant had connections within the community to link me to and identify potential participants. Transgender Michigan also operates a website that is set up as a clearinghouse of information for transgender people in Michigan seeking treatment and social resources. The second key informant was a psychologist in professional practice who works with transgender clients in the geographic area in which the study was conducted. The key informants advertised within their respective organizations by providing the potential participants with my name and contact information and a brief description of the study. The advertisement asked the participant to then contact me if they are interested in being a part of the study.

Instrumentation

In qualitative analysis, I, as the researcher, am the primary instrument of investigation. In order to minimize researcher bias a researcher biographical sketch is provided in the appendix (Appendix B). Additionally, the chair of the dissertation committee reviewed the answers I provided in response to the protocol to expose any biases or assumptions, which was transcribed and is included in the data analysis process. Four sources of data were collected in this study, including interviews, physical artifacts reviews, participant-observations, and a participant art project, along with documentation such as websites and literature that the participants utilized during their identity

development process (Stake, 2006; Yin, 2014). I developed research protocols for each of the phases of data collection and can be found in the appendices. The protocols were reviewed by all three members of the committee for face validity and quality of data collection. The protocols were developed based on the research questions of the study and the theoretical and conceptual foundations of the study.

Recruitment, Participation, and Data Collection

As described above, participants were recruited through advertising using key informants in the transgender community, and asked to contact me to make first contact and obtain informed consent. The study was advertised in the office of a therapist who specialized in transgender client work and also advertised on the Transgender Michigan Facebook social media sites to recruit participants. During the first contact with the participant, I scheduled an interview at a neutral location chosen by and convenient to the participant that allows for a 60-90 min interview with no distractions. I conducted the interview during the first face-to-face (FTF) appointment, beginning with securing informed consent. I described all phases of data collection, including the interview, artifact review, participant-observation, and the art project to the participant for informed consent. The interview was recorded and transcribed by TranscribeMe, a service affiliated with QSR International, the producers of the NVivo CAQDAS product. The transcripts were emailed to the participants for approval and member checking. At the conclusion of the interview I scheduled a second FTF appointment to review physical artifacts.

I conducted the artifact review as the next FTF appointment at a neutral location chosen by and convenient to the participant. I listened and took field notes during the stories of symbolism of the artifacts in regard to the participant's transition in sex/gender and how this unfolded as their identity developed, and later documented the field notes in NVivo.

Next, I scheduled a series of 5 to 10 contacts in which participant/direct observations were made with the participant during day-to-day activities in publically accessible places. I met the participant at the pre-arranged location, made observations and asked questions for clarification during the observation time, followed by a short debriefing meeting to ask a few more in depth questions, and immediately wrote down field notes. These were later transcribed into NVivo.

At the final FTF appointment, the art project was reviewed with the participant and photos were taken to include as figures in the write up of this dissertation. The art project brought together the experiences prior to and during the research project and provides a symbolic work for the transition the participants experienced. After the detailed case history was developed and written, the researcher presented the participant with a copy of their personal case history for review of accuracy. I did not have any further scheduled contact, but left open the possibility of future contact until the conclusion of the data analysis procedures.

Interview Data

The first meeting time was scheduled during the first contact with the participant via telephone and email, and was scheduled for two hours to provide ample time for the participant to feel at ease, secure informed consent, and to conduct the interview. The interview was recorded with audio recording equipment provided by the researcher. The audio files were sent out for transcription to TranscribeMe after the interview was completed. I designed the interview protocol (see Appendix A) for this research study. Creswell (2009, 2013) suggests that four to five interview questions are sufficient in a semi-structured interview, but in this study more questions are needed to fully capture the rich detail for case study analysis (Stake, 1995; Yin, 2014). For this project, an interview protocol of 11 interview questions was generated based on the central and subquestions of the study to achieve a full picture of the lived experiences of the participants. The dissertation committee reviewed the interview protocol for face validity. Once transcribed, the interview audio and text files were loaded into the NVivo program for storage and review. The transcriptions were read while coding and writing memos during analysis to document my thoughts and impressions of the data as analysis was conducted. The individual interviews were analyzed first through coding, and the codes were then sorted into categories and themes, which were then compared across cases to establish any similarities and differences. All of this work was conducted in NVivo. At the conclusion of the interview I scheduled a second meeting to return and go over physical artifacts, which was also scheduled for approximately two hours.

Review of Physical Artifacts

After each interview, I conducted a review of physical artifacts (see Appendix B). The participants were asked to bring personal items such as clothing, wigs, and other transition artifacts that symbolize the transition from one gender to the other, and provide the story behind the artifact. Physical artifact data consisted of photos for researcher use only and field notes. I asked the participants to show me important items they have collected during their transition and to describe the items' importance to their identity development process. During this process, field notes were written by hand and later entered into NVivo. This data was also analyzed individually and across cases for themes.

Participant-Observations

Participant-observations (see Appendix C) were the third source of data for the study. At the conclusion of the review of physical artifacts, I conducted three additional FTF meetings during which I spent time with a participant conducting day-to-day activities in the participant's life and asked them to provide some details as to how the activities differ compared to before and after transitioning. I listened during the observation time and later hand-written notes were made and uploaded as memos to NVivo. During this stage of the data collection process, the goal was to capture the context of the participants' lives in terms of how life as a transgender person in a rural area has shaped their identity.

Art Project

The final source of data for this study was an art project completed by a participant. One participant completed all phases of data collection, including the art project. The participant was asked to compose a visual representation of their transition in any media they chose. The assignment was given at the conclusion of the final participant-observation session, and several weeks passed before the project was complete. The project was reviewed at a local coffee shop while photos and field notes were hand written. Both the photos and the notes were transferred into NVivo for analysis.

Documentation data were included along all phases of the data collection, which included websites, social media sites, blogs, and any form of electronic media in the public domain on the Internet, as well as literary works such as fiction and non-fiction works by and/or about transgender people. The specific Internet or literary sources that were reviewed came from participant reports of what they have utilized during their transition to learn about transgender culture.

Qualitative Data Analysis Plan

Case study data analysis often involves an iterative, cyclical process of pouring over data from various sources multiple times through a deductive analytical process (Stake, 1995; Yin, 2014). Part of the design of case study methodology is that there is no definitive point in the process in which data analysis begins (Stake, 1995). In truth, data analysis already began at the topic selection stage of this work through a process of determining the gap in the literature by performing literature searches and based on

professional counseling experiences. The analytical strategy of this multiple case study was to develop detailed case descriptions through thick description that provides rich details for within-case analysis, and a comparative study of the similarities and differences of the cases through cross-case analysis, utilizing the codes and themes generated from the interview analysis (Stake, 1995; Yin, 2014). The discussion in Chapter 5 includes naturalistic generalizations that may apply to other cases in similar context (Stake, 1995).

Ponterotto (2005) posited that social constructivism emphasizes the lived experiences of individuals from an idiographic perspective of the world. A social constructivist approach in qualitative research avoids finding the *true* value or reality experienced by the masses and focuses instead on an egalitarian philosophy of individual meaning-making activities of the individual (Lee, 2012). In this way, individual experiences of transgender persons who live in rural locales are first be described individually through within-case analysis, followed by an interpretive analysis of common themes that emerge from the interview data through cross-case analysis.

The propositions in this study stem from the conceptual framework in which I propose that transgender people living in a rural area discovered and learned about their transgender identity through online resources and literature in the absence of a transgender (or LGB) community. I posited that identity development occurs through individual constructivist ontology at the beginning of the process and later progresses into a coming out process unique to rural communities. The following statements are propositions for this study:

1. The process begins with discovery of the new identity in which the person keeps this information to himself, herself, or hirself.
2. The person then explores the new identity while regulating their old identity in public spheres.
3. The person then begins to come out to important people (friends and family).
4. Through a combination of discovering that gender is fluid and that gender is a socially constructed concept, the person begins transformation, which means coming out to the entire community.

After the data was collected, organized, and analyzed using detailed description methods, the propositions were revisited and discussed in terms of how the data support or do not support these constructs in Chapter 5. This process also included relying on theoretical propositions outlined above (Yin, 2014) and involved tracing the theoretical propositions through each case to verify or exclude the propositions in each case. The propositions provided a framework to analyze and present the data.

There are several analytic techniques used in case study analysis as well, specifically pattern matching, explanation building, time-series analysis, logic models, and cross-case synthesis (Yin, 2014). This study utilized within-case and cross-case analysis, as well as thick description, as analytical techniques, which was performed after all cases were written up with detailed descriptions and analyzed for thematic content and context. The techniques chosen apply to all cases and unify the data from all cases into more general ideas following the deductive reasoning process. In this way, the data was transformed from general to specific and back to general.

Computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS) is becoming more and more popular among researchers and many software packages are now available for researchers to use (Bazeley & Jackson, 2013; Yin, 2014). The value of using a CAQDAS is cataloguing and organizing data in an electronic project that can be searched and manipulated within the software, which allowed me to analyze the data from many additional angles that would have been excessively labor intensive prior to the use of CAQDAS (Bazeley & Jackson, 2013). Software packages have evolved to be able to store, code, and organize audio and video files, web pages, and various forms of media (Bazeley & Jackson, 2013; Yin, 2014). CAQDAS assisted data gathering and analysis by organizing the data and having a single point of storing all data, which also improved the security of the data and provided a chain of evidence. In this study I utilized NVivo 10, a product developed by QSR International, Inc (QSR International, Inc., 2012). NVivo was used to upload and catalogue all data related to the study as a means of storage and organization, including interview transcripts, websites and other electronic media, researcher-generated memos in reaction to data collection experiences, field notes, and reflexive journaling by the researcher. Coding and categorical aggregation were also conducted in the NVivo software.

Issues of Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness in qualitative research encompasses four domains, namely credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Miles & Huberman, 1994). Credibility consists of activities that aim to achieve internal validity in the study. Transferability includes the steps taken to insure external validity of

the study. Dependability is akin to reliability, and confirmability is a measure of objectivity of the research. Below is a brief summary of how each of these domains was addressed in this study. Case study research also requires four additional principles that support quality in research, such as case study researchers should

1. Use multiple sources of evidence (data);
2. Create a case study database;
3. Maintain a chain of evidence (data);
4. Exercise care in using data from electronic sources (Yin, 2014, p.118-129).

With this in mind, credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability strategies are outlined in the following paragraphs.

Credibility

In order to achieve credibility, prolonged engagement and member checks were employed (Patton, 2002; Stake, 1995, 2006; Yin, 2014). Prolonged engagement consists of prolonged contact with participants to assure the maximum amount of data collection and to build trust with participants (Creswell, 2013; Stake, 2006; Yin, 2014), and was met through repeated, lengthy contact with each participant for at least five to ten hours with one participant over the course of the study. The three other participants discontinued participation after the interview or artifact review phases of data collection. Interviews were conducted in the first session with participants, followed by additional contacts in which physical artifact review and participant-observation data were collected. I utilized member checking during the data analysis process by providing participants with

transcripts of the interviews to verify accuracy and debriefing after each activity to process thoughts and feelings about the activity (Stake, 1995; Yin, 2014).

Transferability

Participant debriefing, keeping an audit trail and member checking were utilized to achieve transferability (Miles & Huberman, 1994, Patton, 2002). Debriefing is a method qualitative researchers can use in lieu of interrater reliability if no other raters are available (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Creswell, 2013), such was the case in this work. Participants were emailed transcripts of their own interview and asked to approve them to assure that what was recorded was what they intended to convey.

Dependability

Dependability is a measure of how consistent the data are over time and between researchers and methods (Miles & Huberman, 1994). In order to establish dependability, I utilized triangulation and audit trails. Triangulation was achieved through data, theoretical, or methodological techniques (Stake, 1995). The dissertation committee provided theoretical triangulation by providing review and feedback of the work on the analyses. Methodological triangulation was used in the various methods of gathering data and recruiting participants, while the various types of data collected and the data analysis process met data triangulation. During the data analysis phase, an audit trail was kept to document each step of the data analysis for future review, which was assisted through the NVivo software package.

Confirmability

Confirmability is a process of maintaining objectivity in the research process in terms of how easily the research could be replicated (Miles & Huberman, 1994). I self-disclosed any researcher bias in the study to assure confirmability by providing a biographical sketch that can be found in the appendix (See Appendix B). I also completed a written self-interview that was reviewed by the dissertation committee chair member to document any additional biases. The details of the research protocol were included in the study, along with interview questions. A chain of evidence was maintained through the use of NVivo software to provide documentation of where the data came from to support the conclusions of the study. I utilized self-reflexivity (Janesick, 2011) through memoing in the NVivo software and participant reflexivity through review of transcripts of rough drafts that allowed the research to remain as reliable as possible through constant comparison techniques (Patton, 2002).

Ethical Procedures

The American Counseling Association (ACA) Code of Ethics (American Counseling Association, 2005) contains Section G for guidelines in conducting research in an ethical manner. This section covers several topics that researchers must address in conducting research studies. Counselors are required to conduct research that does not harm participants, that participants are fully informed of the nature and intention of the research, that multicultural and diversity aspects of the participants are respected, avoid deception and multiple relationships, and storage/disposal of the products of research. In this study, a primary concern for me were multiple relationships I had as a counselor to

several people identifying as transgender in the same area research was conducted; which was also be another potential source of bias to manage. I described my role as a clinician to all participants and any prior professional relationships limited the sample of potential participants. The participants were identified as new participants that I have not been a counselor for so they were able to participate in the research.

Another consideration was confidentiality due to the sensitive nature of sexual and gender identity in a rural area, protecting a person's identity was unquestionably necessary. Because the research is published, identifying information was not used from any of the participants. Lastly, researchers need to be knowledgeable about the research process and create contingency plans for debriefing and referral to outside mental health professionals, if necessary (ACA, 2005). I provided each participant with a Resources and Referrals information sheet after each interview that the participant may consult for additional follow up at the completion of the interviews. On a personal-professional level, during the course of this doctoral degree program, I have taken coursework in advanced qualitative methodology and professional ethics, and I have been a licensed counselor for eight years, with clinical experience in treating transgender people in the past three years.

Each participant completed consent forms at the beginning of the interview. There were no incentive prizes or monetary value to participating in the study. Confidentiality of the participants and data collected from participants was maintained through locked filed cabinets and password protected computers. Names of the participants were changed to further maintain confidentiality. Participants were debriefed following the interview, and none required further debriefing on an ongoing basis. No therapeutic interventions

were explicitly performed on participants, but a referral for ongoing counseling would have been provided in the area in which the participant resided if debriefing was not sufficient. No participants required a therapeutic referral. Coming out can be a traumatic and emotionally challenging experience and I was sensitive to this by maintaining close observation of the participants during the interview for signs of distress or discomfort. None of these were detected, but if they were the interview would have been redirected or stopped based on the participants' or researcher's judgment. Participants reviewed their own interview transcriptions for member checking and approval. Only the student researcher and dissertation committee had access to transcriptions of interview data and transcripts will not be published in the body of this dissertation; however, brief pieces of transcribed interviews may be used to highlight points in the body of the dissertation through direct quotations.

Summary

Research methodology the foundation of a study and requires a solid plan, and case studies in particular require a detailed research protocol to improve rigor of the research (Yin, 2014). In this study, I conducted interviews using a multiple case study design. Creswell (2013), and other authors (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Maxwell, 2013; Miles & Huberman, 1994; Patton, 2002), recommend at least three measures of trustworthiness to be followed in order to produce a quality study. This study utilized seven quality measures to achieve trustworthiness, which can be determined as successful. The most significant struggle was the issue of being a native to the area I conducted the study in and having previous knowledge of the LGBTQ population in this

area. Any conflicts of interest and multiple relationships were carefully managed, and full disclosure was used in the data reporting and analysis.

All of the data collection and analysis results are found in Chapter 4. A discussion of the interpretation of results and future research possibilities are founded in Chapter 5.

Chapter 4: Results

Introduction

This study began as an inquiry into how transgender people in a rural area used the Internet and other media resources during their identity development process. The collected data provided a much richer and broader view into the lives of transgender people who came out and lived in a rural area of Michigan. The central questions of this study were to identify the process by which a transgender person discovered his, her, or hir identity and the lived experiences of transgender people in a rural area. Two issue subquestions were used to ask specifically how transgender people in a rural area found information about transgender culture and what types of online activities transgender people used to find information. Specific topical subquestions were used to investigate the online resources transgender people accessed and the interaction between the person and the online resources through the lived experiences of the participant.

Data collection, analysis, and results are presented chronologically as they occurred over the course of the study. The protocols for interviews, artifact reviews, and observations were followed in all four cases. The setting and demographics of the study were presented first to provide context for the cases in the study, followed by a detailed explanation of the data collection procedures. The chapter was then divided into two data analysis sections, vis-à-vis, within-case and cross-case analyses. At the end of the chapter, I discussed trustworthiness and results of the data analysis. Throughout Chapter 4 and 5, I used direct quotes from participants to highlight and emphasize themes that

supported the findings. The quotes were presented in first person to avoid confusion of the speaker and for ease of the reader.

Researcher Bias

A structured self-interview, a reflective journaling exercise used in the qualitative research process (Janesick, 2011), was used in this study to allow me to address specific questions about bias that have the potential to become problematic; I discussed these potential biases at the beginning of data collection to enhance the transparency of the study. The impact of the biases on data analysis were discussed later in Chapter 4.

Self-Interview Questions

1. How will I know if a question I ask a participant is free of assumptions from my own experience living in a rural area?

This question was impossible to answer, as I am human and it is impossible for humans to separate themselves from bias. This was a frequent topic in my research training and one way to monitor researcher bias was to perform journal exercises to get in the right frame of mind. I completed these journal exercises and frequently used visualization before and after any contact with the participant as a reflexive activity, which I would then write about in a research journal. I would often catch some of these thoughts as they passed through and asked myself if this thought was an assumption or an idea the participant was trying to convey. This question was equally impossible to answer, but I would write these down in the research journal and refer back to them as I wrote Chapter 4. The reflexive journaling and visualization followed by journaling

helped me separate, to some degree, my own personal biases as a gay man from a rural area compared to the experiences of my participants.

2. What assumptions do I have about transgender identity development?

The assumptions I had at the beginning of the study about transgender identity development was that it was analogous to my own identity development as a gay male in a rural area. I assumed they always felt differently, had feelings of awkwardness and different-ness in public situations, and the fear of friends and/or family finding out who they truly were. I also assumed that they felt isolated and that they would discover transgender communities online and in larger metropolitan areas and immediately move to an area where there were more people like them. Lastly, I assumed that their identity development was much like my own in that they discovered who they were and began to assimilate this new identity into their self-concept.

3. Where did I find information during my own identity development process?

I found most of my information by connecting with a local gay men's social group that had a weekly dinner at a local restaurant. Since I was 16- to 17-years-old, my mother came with me to my first time at this group and introduced herself to a man who agreed to "watch over me" and not let me "get in trouble," meaning he would educate me on how gay men interact socially and how to avoid being taken advantage of. From that point on, he became a sort of mentor and I was able to ask him any questions I had, and he also provided me a broad education on LGBTQ issues. He was an invaluable resource. The second most valuable resources were bookstores and books, where I could read

fiction and nonfiction books about LGBTQ issues and life. Lastly, the Internet provided me with a wealth of information, but for a gay man this was oftentimes related to the porn industry or "hook-up" websites. There were a few organizations that had websites that contained information that I was aware of, but they were rare in the early 1990s when I was coming out.

4. How do I avoid assuming younger transgender people are as equally computer literate as I am?

Honestly I do not think I can avoid this assumption. The professional literature on the topic of older computer users is conflicted in several publications that both provided evidence and no evidence that there is an age barrier to computer learning and use (Broad, Chan, & Caputi, 2010). Anyone younger than I am is far more computer literate, especially when it comes to social media. I hoped to get a wide range of ages of participants, which is what occurred; two of the participants were 20-years-old, and the other two were in their 40s. I do not believe this assumption altered any probing questions I made during the data collection phase as I attempted to be as fair and equitable in my questions across all participants.

5. Do I assume that older transgender people are less computer literate and will not have an online presence?

At the onset of the study, I did assume that older transgender people would have a more difficult time accessing online resources and making connections through social media or online communities. The older participants, both in their 40s, were not so old that they have no computer experience. Thus, they each had a significant online presence

and were able to control how much and what information they were looking for and putting out about themselves on the Internet.

In the end, I conformed to the measures of trustworthiness outlined in Chapter 3. No deviation from the proposal was necessary and no further contact with the IRB was needed. Additional time and more participants would have likely enhanced the study, but data saturation was achieved and was used to answer the research questions that supported the results below. Additional limitations and recommendations are found in Chapter 5.

Setting

The Walden University IRB committee approved the proposal March 24, 2014; the approval number for this study was 03-25-14-0049519. Data collection began the first week of April 2014 and participant recruiting began by reaching out to a local therapist who was identified as a local informant, as well as advertising the study three times over 12 weeks on the Facebook page of a transgender advocacy organization that served as a resource for northern Michigan. One participant was identified through the local therapist, and the other three participants were recruited through the Facebook advertisement. Data collection progressed at community sites selected by the participants over the next 5 months.

There were several barriers to recruiting participants and collecting data during this stage of the study. Distance, in terms of geography, finding an appropriate meeting site, and time the participants had to complete the study were three barriers that continually surfaced while collecting data. A more populated town, approximately

20,000, in northern Michigan was the easiest and most logical place to find meeting places because of the larger size and academic-oriented community. This allowed the participant and me to meet without bringing undue attention onto either of us, which would have happened if any meetings occurred in the smaller towns outside of the selected town; therefore, all participant contacts were conducted in this larger town. This required negotiating with the participants as to where and when to meet and setting up the meeting place ahead of the meeting.

The goal of four participants, two FTM and two MTF, was achieved; however, only one participant provided a full set of data for all four phases of the study, while three participants completed varying levels of data collection. One participant completed the interview and artifact analysis over two face-to-face contacts. One participant had to complete both the interview and artifact reviews in a single face-to-face meeting because he depended on rides from friends and lived in a small town 30 miles outside of the meeting site. Lastly, one participant only completed the interview phase. This was a significant limitation of the study in terms of methodology, but the results were rich and detailed across all participant interviews, and the additional data gathering steps added to the richness of the data without changing the inherent meaning derived from the data analysis. The northern Lower Peninsula region of Michigan is also a high demand tourist destination in Michigan and the data were collected between April and September, the prime summer tourist season in the area. Both of the FTM participants were young adults and worked multiple jobs to support themselves, and were busy working during the summer season.

Demographics

As described above, the broadest overview of the setting is a rural area of Michigan, specifically in the northern 26-county area locally referred to as Northern Michigan. The population of the area was less than 500,000 people across more than 11,000 square miles, with small towns of 5,000-10,000 people sparsely populated across the area; the largest town in the area has a population of approximately 30,000 people. The town was noted as a hub of liberal political ideology and progressive thinkers, situated in one of the more conservative areas in the state, and it has been known as a gay-friendly town for many years. This created an environment of safety for the LGBTQ people living in the town. The town was also a high demand tourist destination and was therefore somewhat more diverse in race, ethnicity, and other demographic factors than the surrounding areas, which range between 95-98% Caucasian and low- to middle-socioeconomic status (State of Michigan, 2013).

All participants resided in the geographic region defined in the study. All but one of the participants was originally from this same area, and the one participant who relocated to the area of study was originally from another rural area in southwestern Lower Michigan. All of the participants have come out to friends and family, started their transition to their preferred gender, and presented as their preferred gender during the course of the study. The two FTM participants were both 20 years old, while the two MTF participants were over 40 years or older. All participants had siblings, friends, and family that formed their support networks.

Data Collection

Using recommendations from Yin (2014) and Stake (2006) several sources of data collection were attempted in each case. In addition to the documents and sources reviewed in the literature review, I attempted four data sources from each participant. In total, four participants were involved with the study. Shortly after IRB approval, I posted the advertisement on Facebook to recruit participants, as well as contacting the local therapist to advise her that I was now ready to begin data collection.

Participant #1 - Maddie

Maddie was the first participant of the study who responded to the advertisement on a Facebook page specifically for transgender people living in northern Michigan. We made contact via phone call and Maddie said she was “very motivated to be part of the study as my father was a psychologist” and “I recognize the value of the study.” Maddie and I made arrangements to meet at the public library where we would discuss the details of the study. Maddie was on time for the meeting and presented as female, well dressed and groomed, and engaging in conversation. She agreed to all parts of the study and to include quotes, as well as reviewing the transcript for member checking. The interview was scheduled at the end of the first meeting, followed by several other meetings to collect data. After signing the informed consent form, two additional contacts were scheduled one week apart at a public building, per Maddie’s choice. The meeting space at this site could be rented by the public and provided a quiet and safe environment to collect data. The interview lasted 90 minutes and a total of 2 hours was spent with Maddie at this contact. The artifact review appointment was conducted one week later

and lasted 90 minutes. After the first two contacts at this site, three additional contacts over the next three weeks were scheduled in the community to gather participant-observation data, first at a grocery store, second at a mall, and third in the downtown area. Each of these contacts lasted 60 minutes, and 15 minutes were spent after each observation to debrief with the participant. Lastly, Maddie selected a coffee shop in the downtown area to meet and share her art project three weeks after the final observation contact. This contact lasted for another 90 minutes. All of the contacts with Maddie occurred over an eight-week period, and a total of 8 hours and 45 minutes were spent on face-to-face data collection time with Maddie.

Maddie followed through with the most participation by completing all phases of data collection: the interview, artifact review, three observations, and the art project. The interview was recorded using the TranscribeMe smartphone application, which is an NVivo product, uploaded to the service for transcription, and returned within 48 hours. The transcript was emailed to Maddie for review and she approved the text without changes. Pictures and field notes were collected during the artifact review and transferred to NVivo for analysis. Field notes were also written after each participant-observation session, and during the presentation of the art project. All field notes were transferred to NVivo through the use of memos, and photographs were uploaded into the software.

Participant #2 - Andrew

Andrew was the second participant who agreed to be part of the study. Andrew was the only participant referred by the local therapist. I initially met Andrew at a Transgender Day of Remembrance (TDOR) ceremony held in November of 2013, which

he attended with his mother and older sister and presented as male. Andrew's therapist informed him about the event, and also attended the event and introduced Andrew and I without any mention of the study. After IRB approval was obtained in March of 2014, the key informant explained to Andrew about the study in general terms without discussing the purpose or context of the study, and secured verbal permission to share their contact information with the researcher. This information was used to contact Andrew, who agreed to be part of the study. The initial meeting with Andrew occurred in April of 2014 at a local community college library meeting room chosen by Andrew, where the phases of the study were discussed, Andrew signed the informed consent document, and the interview commenced and lasted for 60 minutes, but a total of 90 minutes was spent at this contact for initial discussion about the study and 15 minutes of debriefing time after the interview. Andrew presented as male, he seemed somewhat reserved and quiet at first, and the initial answers to interview questions were brief, but as the interview progressed Andrew appeared to relax and his answers became richer in detail. The interview was recorded using the TranscribeMe smartphone application, which is an NVivo product, uploaded to the service for transcription, and returned within 48 hours. The transcript was emailed to Andrew for review and he approved the text without changes.

The next scheduled contact occurred one week later for the artifact review, which was at the same public building the TDOR ceremony was held, per Andrew's choice. We met in a room that is available for the public to rent. The artifact review occurred over a total of 90 minutes, for a total of 3 hours of face-to-face time spent with Andrew on data collection. Pictures and field notes were collected during the artifact review and

transferred to NVivo for analysis. All field notes were transferred to NVivo through the use of memos, and photographs were uploaded into the software. At the conclusion of the artifact review, Andrew explained that he did not “do much” when leaving his house other than to go to work, and observations would not be practical at his workplace without becoming obvious. However, he agreed to contact me if he did go out and do something that he would feel comfortable for me to observe. Several weeks went by and Andrew did not contact me, and at the same time I contacted Andrew over three attempts via email to check in and remind him of the study, particularly the art project. After no further contact at five months, Andrew discontinued participation in the study and his data was kept for analysis per his consent.

Participant #3 - Joe

Joe was the third participant who agreed to be part of the study and responded to the same Facebook page advertisement previously described. Joe lives approximately 30 minutes outside the city where I reside, therefore initial contact was by email and then phone. Joe was very motivated to participate and agreed to be a part of the study, but was only able to meet only one time because of transportation issues; therefore, we negotiated that the first contact was to include both the interview and artifact review, and any further contact would occur if Joe was able to meet. Joe chose to meet at a public building as well stating, “I used to go there, I know where that’s at.”

Joe arrived at the public building presenting as male and very engaging in conversation, we discussed the phases of the study and Joe signed the informed consent form. The interview, which lasted about 60 minutes, commenced and was recorded. The

recording was stopped at the end of the interview and we briefly debriefed how the interview went, for approximately 10 minutes. There was a short, five-minute break and then Joe presented his artifacts while photographs and field notes were taken, which lasted another 60 minutes. A total of 2.5 hours of face-to-face time was spent with Joe in data collection. The interview was recorded using the TranscribeMe smartphone application, which is an NVivo product, uploaded to the service for transcription, and returned within 48 hours. The transcript was then emailed to Joe for review and he approved the text without changes. The pictures and field notes collected during the artifact review were transferred to NVivo for analysis. All field notes were transferred to NVivo through the use of memos, and photographs were uploaded into the software.

At the conclusion of the interview/artifact review contact, Joe indicated he had produced a series of video blogs (vlogs) on YouTube about his coming out and transition experiences as a FTM trans person. Joe agreed that these videos could be used as part of the data for the study and the NVivo NCapture feature was used to capture and import the YouTube videos into the program for analysis as part of the observation data. A total of three videos that ranged from 4.5 to 7 minutes long were downloaded and reviewed, and memos were written about each video. Over the next several weeks Joe was contacted via email four times to remind him about the art project. He responded to the first email that he was still interested in participating in the study, but had gotten busy with his job, and then did not respond to any additional attempts at contact. He discontinued participation from the study and the data were saved for analysis per the informed consent.

Participant #4 - Jessica

Jessica was the fourth participant who agreed to be part of the study. Jessica responded to the Facebook advertisement earlier in data collection, shortly after the first Facebook post in April, and originally her schedule did not allow for the two of us to connect and meet face-to-face. We communicated several times via email and Facebook Messenger and she decided she was too busy and could not meet the time commitment of participating in the study. In July, I met Jessica face-to-face at a small LGBTQ Pride Event in a town in northwestern Michigan, where she introduced herself to me. We did not have time to talk, but made a verbal agreement to connect and discuss the study. Approximately two weeks passed and we scheduled to meet at a local restaurant for approximately 60 minutes where I went over the informed consent and four phases of data collection. Jessica said she would like to participate as much as her schedule allowed and we set a date to conduct the interview one week later, which was then postponed another week because of work conflicts.

Jessica chose to meet at a public building in a large town in northern Michigan for the interview. She arrived on time and presented as female. Jessica was very engaging in conversation right when she arrived. We went over the informed consent form again and she signed the consent form. We began the interview and the recording using the TranscribeMe smartphone application to capture the interview, which lasted for 60 minutes. At the conclusion of the interview we debriefed for 15 minutes and made plans to meet the following week for the artifact review. The recording was transcribed and emailed to Jessica two days later for review, and she approved it as written. The artifact

review appointment was rescheduled two times and Jessica discontinued participation in the study. During these last communications, Jessica indicated she was working a busy schedule, had two jobs, and it was difficult for her to have time to meet. A total of 2.5 hours of face-to-face time was spent with Jessica in data collection and data were saved for analysis per the informed consent.

Data Analysis

Data analysis was performed using the NVivo qualitative data analysis software. The data was loaded into the program as it was collected, including audio recordings of the interviews, interview transcripts, photos of the physical artifacts for review with researcher notes, observation notes from the three observations performed with Maddie, and Maddie's art project. The YouTube videos of Joe's vlog were also captured and analyzed within the NVivo software. The headings *Identity Development* and *Rural Experiences* were used at the end of each within-case analysis, as they became the two dominant themes emerging from the data. After three rounds of coding, the codes that emerged were sorted into categories, which were then sorted into themes. The categories and codes all seemed to fit into the individual's experience with their identity development and what that was like in a rural environment. The identity development theme encompassed childhood experiences, high school, up to and after transitioning, and the internal struggle the individual experienced to get to where they are today. The rural experiences theme included all data in which the experience was thought to be unique to living in a rural area by the participant, or the participant's own inferences about the

differences between coming out in a rural versus urban area. This is discussed in more detail in the cross-case analysis section of this chapter.

Within-Case Analysis

Maddie

Demographics. Maddie is a 47-year-old Caucasian MTF transgender person who recently relocated to a small town in northwestern Michigan from a similar small town further south. The move occurred in the six months prior to the first contact and Maddie states she "moved as a way to restart my new life as a woman in a new place." Maddie worked for over 20 years as an engineer while living as a man, and continues looking for work in her new town, but not necessarily in the engineering field. Maddie is currently on hormone treatment and lives full time as a woman, and she has for the past year. Maddie described her coming out as "a process that is still ongoing," but states "I started transitioning after my daughter graduated high school, about five years ago."

Maddie's father was a psychologist and professor at a small community college and is still living. During the course of this study, Maddie wrote a letter to her father to come out to him and described his response as "lukewarm but accepting." Her mother was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis when Maddie was a child and her mother eventually moved out, after which time Maddie had little to no contact with her until she passed away when Maddie was an adolescent. Maddie has one younger brother who works as a social worker. Maddie and her family lived in the same small town she relocated from, which is also the same town she lived in while she was married and raising her children. Maddie has three adult children, two daughters and a son. Maddie is

out to all of her children and family, and most friends. Her youngest child, a daughter, has not adjusted well to Maddie's transition, but her older children have fully accepted her and her son currently lives with her "until he can get back on his feet." Maddie described her divorce as being "difficult" and she does not have much contact with her ex-wife.

Artifact review. Maddie brought nine artifacts in total, including her first earrings that she had her ears pierced with, her first pair of breast forms, a Burpee seed catalog that had her preferred-gender name, a picture of her car, her first cosmetic box with her first cosmetics she purchased, her first pair of women's eyeglasses, her first wig, a library card in her preferred-gender name, and a photo album of her trip to Kansas with pictures of the Westboro Baptist Church and the Equality House. Maddie also brought her purse with her to the meeting and it was included in the artifact review.

Maddie commented that "the type or style of purse doesn't matter, but just carrying a purse became a part of daily life. It's now part of who I am." Maddie talked about the purse as a "tool" as much as it is a "part of making the transition." Maddie explained the earrings were her "first meaningful step I took in making a transition." She told a story about getting her ears pierced in Kansas during a business trip and the piercer asked her "Both ears?" which Maddie described as "getting over the edge" of starting the transition. Maddie described her eyeglasses, which were purple, as part of "rediscovering who I am" and that she did not keep a lot of the things she bought during this transition time, but these "were special" and she has kept them. When Maddie shared the photo album during the review, she became somewhat choked up and described it "as a

singularly significant event" to see the Westboro Baptist Church and the Equality House across the street. She said she "looked at all that hate" and this is when she thought "I'm going to be discriminated against" because of her new identity. Maddie said her next immediate thought was "full steam ahead!" Maddie described her wig, breast forms, and cosmetic kit as "it's my becoming," explaining that "we all have to go through this phase of experimentation." Maddie considered the Burpee seed catalog and the library card as "small successes" because these were the first items she had in her preferred name after her name change. Lastly, she considers the purchase of her vehicle, a Mazda Miata, as "the culmination of transitioning for me" because she considers it a "feminine car" and expressed "who I am."

Participant-observation. The observations were carried out over three contacts, once per week, lasting two to three hours per contact. The first participant-observation was conducted at a local supermarket while Maddie was shopping for groceries. The second participant-observation was conducted at a local mall while Maddie did some clothes shopping. The third participant-observation was conducted in the downtown walkable shopping area and concluded at a coffee shop.

Across the three participant-observations the dominant theme was Maddie's desire to blend in, or pass, and not display flashy or out-of-character clothing or behavior. Maddie commented "I am most concerned about blending in than dressing flashy or standing out" and "passing is more about how I carry myself in my body language." During the mall contact, Maddie visited four clothing stores and browsed the ladies

section in each. She often remarked that a clothing item was “not me” or “too busy.” She stated

> I heard or read somewhere that during and after transition a trans person will often shop in the same manner and style as they did prior to coming out. I can tell this is true by looking in my closet [laughter].

Maddie mentioned that women “clock me all the time.” When I asked what this terminology meant Maddie explained that “clock” is slang for “being able to tell I’m trans.” She stated, “men hardly ever notice me, but women do all the time.” When I asked about the other women’s reactions she explained, “they just usually smile and nod slightly.” During the trip to the mall, Maddie stated she had a desire to increase the variety in her wardrobe saying “I still have a lot of solids in my closet; I need more patterned clothes [laughter].” After each participant-observation, I debriefed the encounter with Maddie at each site where we found a quiet place to sit. We discussed my observations and reflections of the contact and Maddie provided details and feedback for clarification.

Art project. Maddie completed the art project over 3 weeks on her own time and we met to review it, at which time she also explained how it was organized. She presented it as a binder with photograph inserts in which she had collected images and photographs that personally represented her transition. Maddie organized it by “whoever was president during the time”, saying, “it was the easiest way for me to organize my thoughts.”

I met with Maddie to go over the project at a local coffee shop, where we met for 90 minutes. She told me a story about how she found her "old" (i.e., male identity) Facebook account and her automatic reaction was to delete it, but she hesitated and instead wrote a note explaining where to find her new Facebook page as a status for any visitor to her page. She described this is a breakthrough moment for her and that “this is something unique to transgender people that they have to deal with but other people don’t.” Photographs of the pages of the binder Maddie created for her art project are presented below, captioned with researcher notes and direct quotes to explain each phase in more detail. Maddie explained her identity development occurred over eight phases, but did not describe them using words, only pictures. I assigned the words used to describe the phases as codes, which were meant to be representative of the context of the picture and the explanation that Maddie provided. The codes were: denial, chaos, escape, Internet, epiphany, doubt, divorce, and learning.

Maddie notes that she did not include the actual transition period in her art project because that was "work" and she feels it is the same for everyone. Maddie said “I enjoyed doing the art project and struggled about how to divide it up, so I decided to use whoever was in office as President of the United States as how I divided up everything.” The descriptions of the photos that represent the phases of Maddie’s transition are listed below in order that the photos were presented. The photos are below the descriptions listed by figure number; the figures correspond to captions.

Denial – Figure 2. Maddie’s story began in a small predominantly Caucasian community, whish she described as “very close-minded - anyone different was suspect."

Maddie initially thought she might be gay, and felt scared, ashamed, denial, and avoidance. She actively fought against this. She married out of convenience to prove to herself she was normal.

Figure 2. Denial.

Chaos – Figure 3. This is depicted as a struggle, bouncing back and forth. Maddie described her feelings as upheaval and chaos, "feelings all over the place."

Figure 3. Chaos.

Escape – Figure 4. Maddie only described this as "heavy drinking and depression."

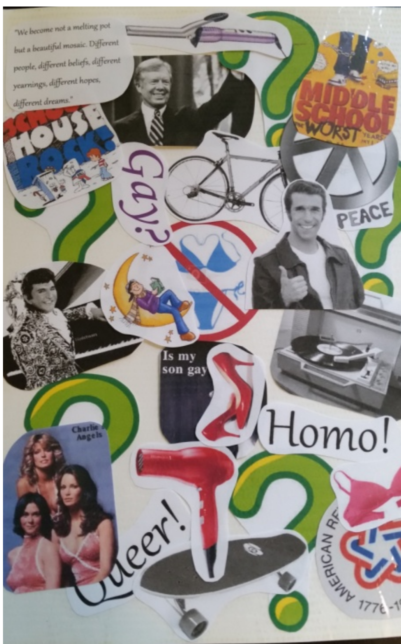

Figure 4. Escape.

Internet. There is no figure representing the Internet stage of Maddie's transition. This heading is something that divides her transition chronologically by technological advances, and gave her the ability to search for transgender information. Maddie spent an extended period of time on research, but could not estimate how long. She explained she would spend "as much time as I could online to research everything from being gay to transgender and cross dressing." This research went on for years. Maddie describes this as a breakthrough moment. She was able to identify with the things she found, "but it wasn't me."

Epiphany – Figure 5. Maddie describes this as a fast and powerful experience. She states:

> I remember the moment this happened when I was sitting in a hotel room in St. Petersburg, FL after a very bad, depressing night. I felt the denial fall away when I stood in front of a mirror and really looked at myself in a dress and fully accepted myself.

Figure 5. Epiphany.

Doubt/Divorce – Figure 6. Immediately after this experience Maddie reports she "went through feelings of fear, mostly about being found out or discovered." She was afraid of transitioning because she didn't think she would look female, but would look like "a man in a dress." She was afraid of being found out and the news spreading through town and losing access to her kids and other consequences. She decided to keep this bottled up to avoid being found out. "I drank more and continued to be depressed and unhappy." Maddie continued to live as a man and continue her role has husband and father and states she was "doing it for my kids."

Maddie divorced her wife after her last child graduated and she "immediately started to explore transitioning, which started slowly at first through more Internet research, but then moved forward quickly." This is the point she started hormone therapy and wearing female clothing more often.

Figure 6. Doubt/Divorce.

Learning – Figure 7. The last stage Maddie described was learning, which "I'm still doing today." Maddie said she first made friends with cross-dressers online and eventually met them in person, which is where "I learned the most about how to be a woman." She explained "I learned subtle behaviors and gestures from spending time with this group, and that made me more believable." "They showed me by example to be in the real world and feel comfortable being myself." She said she had one friend in particular that she spent more time with in the real world to build her confidence. This started about 3-5 years ago and began after a business trip to Kansas.

Figure 7. Learning.

Case summary. Maddie discussed her struggle with her identity from childhood until 5 years ago when she started to transition. Maddie reported feeling different from childhood stating “Actually, it didn't take long for it to feel abnormal because I was told that's not how you're supposed to behave. So I guess from that standpoint, it was as long as I can remember.” Her identity further evolved in junior high school when Maddie states she “remember[s] making a conscious decision that I had a personality that didn't fit in and I needed to change it.” During this time Maddie felt she had to “adopt a personality that matched, that got along” with everyone else. Maddie described “a period of inner turmoil for many years” while she got married and started a family. Maddie explained that this was a time of “heavy alcohol use” to suppress her feelings of being different. Maddie learned about what being transgender was through online searches where she came across cross-dressing and other gender-nonconforming identities, beginning 10 years ago. Much later, during business trips away from home, Maddie

started to "dabble in cross-gender dressing and experimentation", culminating at a point where she fully accepted herself. She then made the decision to stay closeted until her youngest child had graduated high school and became an adult for fear of losing contact with her children. Once this happened, she finalized her divorce and started transitioning with hormone therapy.

Maddie explained that her rural upbringing sheltered her from anything outside the norm of her cultural environment. Maddie explained that growing up, "the town I lived in did not have Internet access and there was a strong sense of the world outside of [her immediate geography]." Maddie states "they only got real Internet in the last 10 years." Maddie decided to move from her hometown to a new place, but still wanted to live in a rural town because she enjoyed the culture of a small town "but I didn't want my neighbors to know every step I was taking. Where I lived before everyone knew everyone else's business within a day-and-a-half." She also did not want to come out publicly in her home town because "I knew there would be some difficulty in people learning to accept me."

Like many transgender people, Maddie felt different while she was growing up from a young age. Eventually she assimilated behaviors that matched how others expected her to act as a young man in a rural area. It wasn't until after college and Maddie's introduction to the Internet that she discovered and explored what it was to be transgender and eventually concluded that this identity fit in a way that any other identity had never fit her. She continued to utilize the Internet to learn about transgender life, how to transition, and what seems like any information she could find. Maddie found online

resources that provided her the confidence and instructional information she needed to move forward in her transition, and also connected her with a cross-dressing group where she found a life-long friend who provided what seems like the most support for her confidence in appearing in public as a woman. The color contrast in Maddie's art project was intentional and signified her ability to see herself genuinely and eventually let the world see her genuine self.

Andrew

Demographics. Andrew is a 20-year-old Caucasian FTM transgender person who is originally from the town in which he lives. Andrew works three part-time jobs, and currently lives at home to save money for hormone treatment and gender confirmation surgery. Andrew came out in high school and described several incidents of harassment during school, which seemed to disappear after graduation and "everyone went their own ways." Andrew has been taking testosterone for about nine months at the time of the interview, but would like to have gender confirmation surgery sometime in 2015. Andrew has been out to his family since high school and "for the most part they are supportive, but have taken a while to adjust to the idea." Andrew has an older sister who recently graduated from medical school and is completing residency, and has one younger brother. Andrew explains that his father had "a tough time" coming to terms with Andrew's transition, but now they are able to talk about it. Andrew has been in two relationships with women and has a circle of friends who support his transition.

Artifact review. Andrew brought 5 artifacts in total, but said there were a couple missing because they had gotten lost or were thrown away because he did not realize the

significance of the object. The items Andrew brought were: his first breast binder (a girdle sort of device to wear around his chest to flatten his breasts and make his chest more masculine), buttons he had made for a high school project that depicted LGBTQ pride slogans and imagery, his first pair of men's swim trunks, the box from his first vial of injectable testosterone, and a set of tools. One artifact that Andrew brought but was not photographed were legal papers in which he petitioned the court to legally change his name, he asked that this not be photographed. Andrew also said he did not have his first razor his father bought him when he started to grow a beard after some time on the testosterone. Photos were taken of each artifact, except the court papers and the razor, and were transferred into NVivo, along with notes from the contact.

Andrew explained the swim trunks were "the first thing I bought in the men's section" while shopping. He explained his mom commented, "make sure there's nothing too guy-like about them" when he went off to buy them. Andrew explained he purchased his binder locally and "it wasn't meant to be one, I used it as one". Andrew explained he spent "hours looking online at YouTube videos and websites… especially ftm.org" to find out how to properly wear a binder. He explained, "they help me look and feel more masculine". Andrew explained he made the buttons for a school project on LGBTQ pride and "after I made them a bunch of friends asked me to make them one, which surprised me". Andrew stated "not many girls get tools when they move out" about the toolbox his dad bought for him when he got his first apartment. Andrew said he "wished he would have kept his first razor" because "I didn't realize what it meant until a long time after I threw it away". Andrew described his experience getting testosterone as "the most

important things that's happened to me in my transition". He explained, "I wanted to start sooner… You get better results the younger your start. At least that's what I hear". He reports that within 3 months his voice changed and he developed facial hair within 4-5 months, and "I grew one-and-a-half inches taller". His last item was the name change paperwork, which happened to be the day after the artifact review meeting. Andrew expressed "I'm excited and nervous, but mostly overwhelmed".

Case summary. Andrew remembers always feeling "like one of the guys" and never fit in with girls. Andrew explains:

> I hung out with a lot of the guys all the time. We always did guy things. I remember having friends over, and we'd always play Superman stuff and a lot of just male things versus going to play with Barbies, or dolls, or all that stuff.

Andrew explained that his parents made comments about his behavior frequently in that he did not engage in typically female behaviors, "My parents would always bring up different things that girls would do versus what guys would do because I have a brother as well". Andrew explained that he thought "I thought I was a lesbian for the longest time just like-- and a lot of guy things, tomboy, but I found out that I wasn't". Andrew described his first encounter with anything transgender related when he was watching *Dancing with the Stars* on television and Chaz Bono was on that night and his parents explained that Chaz was transgender and "I didn't know anything of what that meant, so I decided to Google it and that's when I knew".

Andrew attended a Catholic school for the first years of school through his sophomore year of high school, when he transferred to the public school system. While at

the Catholic school he was brought to the Principle's offices several times for his appearance and was asked if he was lesbian. He explained he had to deny this for fear of being kicked out, which prompted his transfer to a public school by his own choice. Once in the public school, he was able to make friends and come out, but still had several negative experiences from people that Andrew described as "red-necks". Andrew stated:

> I guess just people that dress like rednecks at the school. I don't know if they actually like lived out in the city, but they were like, 'Well, I'm a redneck, you know, blah, blah, blah.' You know. 'I smoke and chew.' Whatever. They were the ones that gave me the most issues. One guy in particular carved the word 'slut' on my car. That was pretty fun. And then another guy, he made fun of me for like three years, until me and my ex broke up. But it got to the point where when he'd see me driving, he'd try and cut in front of me and try and get me off the road, and stuff like that.

Andrew explained that he had no trouble researching his identity online as he always had adequate Internet access and a computer at home, which made things easier despite living in a rural area. Andrew cited several websites, social media sites, and video blog sites from his online interactions. Andrew observed that his rural environment is different from a larger city, stating "I think it differs because we're more - I wouldn't say we're more of a community - but we're kind of smaller, and we do things different, so people are going to act different".

Andrew first heard the word transgender from his parents and immediately began seeking online information about what transgender meant. Andrew initially thought he

was a lesbian because of his attraction to women, but after researching the term transgender online, Andrew concluded that transgender fit better than lesbian as his identity. Andrew also spent a significant amount of time conducting online research and engaged in purchasing things online, reading biographical websites and informational websites about how treatment progresses, as well as the potential side effects of treatment. Another theme that emerged from Andrew's interview was a dialectical sense that the rural area provided both safety and danger in terms of coming out and living openly as a transgender man.

Joe

Demographics. Joe is a 20-year-old Caucasian FTM transgender person who is from a small town in northwestern Michigan, but currently resides in an even smaller town approximately 20 miles west of the town he is from; he currently lives with friends. Joe lives as a male but has not started any medical therapy as of the date of the interview. Joe also came out in high school and states that he had a fairly easy time adjusting and most teachers would refer to him using his preferred pronouns, and he did not experience much harassment. Joe is currently working one part-time job for the summer. Joe is out to his parents and immediate family. His parents are divorced and his mother is remarried, but his father is not. He has one younger brother who lives with his mother. Joe says "my dad is more accepting of my new gender identity than my mom", but attributes this to "my step-father's strong Christian identity" which Joe sees has an influence on his mother's feelings toward him. He says that when "I'm going to be spending time with my mom and step-dad they want me to dress more like a girl".

Artifact review. Joe brought four artifacts in total, but described one other object he no longer had. The artifacts Joe brought were: pictures of him as an early adolescent and during a high school band event, his Magna Cum Laude rope from his high school graduation, and his high school yearbook. Joe talked about the first binder he purchased, but he no longer had this item because it had gotten worn out and he had thrown it away. He also talked about the binder he is currently using, but was wearing it and did not want to be photographed. Photos were taken of the pictures, graduation rope, and yearbook and were transferred to NVivo, along with notes from the contact.

Joe explained he purchased his first binder two years ago and "I had to convince my mom that I could use it in costuming for plays at school". He described his first binder as "very uncomfortable" and he only wore it 5-6 times during cosplay events, short for costume play and is a form of fantasy role play emulating pop culture characters by dressing as the characters, often at conventions. He recently purchased a second binder on his own and it was ordered from underworks.com, a transgender resource website to purchase items like this. He explained it is "much more comfortable" than the last one and he is able to wear it for longer periods of time. Joe explained his yearbook is significant because "everyone signed it to me using my preferred gender pronoun and name". Joe talked about the pictures he showed from childhood and explained how "the person in these pictures is so different from who I am today". Joe explained he was "doing more than going through the motions" in high school by showing his Magna Cum Laude rope from graduation, saying "I'm really proud of this". Lastly, Joe talked about his video blogs on YouTube and that he wanted to "focus on being normal" and "I

wanted to help others going through the same thing I was”. Also, “I wanted to show that there is no right way of doing this”. Joe gave permission to include the YouTube videos as part of the data in the study.

YouTube videos.

Video #1. Joe talks about dysphoria, both in gender and non-gender related situations, and how he was bullied daily in school and told to kill himself, “I shouldn't have listened, seemed stupid, but got the seeds of doubt in my brain to think maybe there is something wrong with me”. Family members told him that he “looked a certain way so I deserved to get beat up and bullied every day”. He goes on to state, “People told me they were honestly afraid of me when they first met me, but as they got to know me they said I was pretty cool. The bullying and self-deprecating showed through and made me unapproachable”.

As for gender-related dysphoria, Joe describes his experience easily in bullet points, saying:

> My chest is something I'm really dysphoric about because I can look in the mirror and see that I have a chest and that means something different from what my brain is saying it is. My voice is another one that I'm dysphoric about because it just doesn't sound overly masculine to me. Another one is my height, I'm 5'6", which isn't really all that short but for a guy it isn't all that tall. Periods also. I know it's icky and no one wants to talk about it, but it's like nature's monthly reminder that you were born in the wrong body and nature is saying ‘f-you’. Lastly is my weight, which I know is a controversial issue, but being such a small

> size it's hard to get taken seriously sometimes. It's like I'm that awkward scrawny guy, which is OK. But I've literally been told 'Oh, you're a pretty boy!' by cashiers and stuff, and that's great, but I just kinda want to be treated normally.

Video #2. Joe made this video on or around Thanksgiving where he discusses how a family member asked if referring to him as his birth name was "OK".

> Like they just assumed that it would just be hunky-dorey to keep referring to me as my birth name. I finally got up the courage to say that it does hurt me to be called that name. And I have some family members that are not willing to call me Joe. It comes to a point where they are willing to come to an agreement with you that this is how you are and who you are and they may not agree but it isn't some sort of here's my phase…It's not a nickname, it's literally your identity. It's so different.

Video #3. Joe talks about watching an Anime (Japanese cartoon) and he saw a female character and thought "You know, if I was a girl, I wish I looked like her". Joe explained he caught this thought and paused, thinking:

> "You know, you've come a long way in your comfort level in your gender identity if you can be so confident in your male self that you can say to yourself 'If I was a girl…' even though the body I was born with was one that is female".

Joe goes on to talk about how confidence in himself helps him get through the day. He explains that he only gets to see a lot of his friends rarely, around twice per year, and this isolation "makes me have super over-protective feelings when they hang out with other friends, like at conventions".

Case summary. Joe discussed his early development as awkward. He reports knowing he was different from a very young age,

> For me, it was one of those things where I didn't quite feel different, but I always sort of identified as male, and I slowly began to realize, as I was treated like a girl but never really saw myself as a girl, as I started hitting puberty and stuff, was really when I realized I was different, but it wasn't one of those, Oh, I'm not a girl.

During puberty is when the difference of gender identity set in as Joe explains “A combination between social messages and trying to fit the image, because I thought that my mom and dad would be disappointed in me if I wasn't this perfect daughter that they, apparently, I thought that they wanted”. The dissonance continued until high school when Joe came out to friends and family. He explained most teachers accepted his new identity and referred to him as his preferred gender, but explains his coming out was strategically balanced between his parents’ divorce and school events. Joe explains that the area he grew up in was conservative and limiting, stating:

> It was interesting in terms of thinking of the area specifically, because we do live in a very conservative area, and especially in my school, there were a lot of very conservative people, and my mother just married into a very conservative family, and I was literally told to apologize to her husband for being transgender.

Joe is originally from a small town and currently lives in another smaller town, and discusses his view of coming out in such an area,

> Well, although there's definitely less people, there's also less people, so whereas, it's good because you don't have to come out to as many people, it also means you

> can't blend in. Once you're labeled as that weird transgender person, then you know people definitely know that.

Joe goes on to say:

> I feel like I really don't have a lot of the resources that I could have if I lived in a city, and that kind of-- I don't know if irritates is the wrong word, but it rubs me the wrong way, to think that just because of where I live it might be really difficult to get access to the resources, and to hormones, or even figure out where I need to go, how to even start approaching it.

Joe is very involved in many online communities as he engages in cosplay. He has found a significant level of acceptance in this community as many characters appear gender-less, and it is common for women to play masculine characters and vice versa. Additionally, the YouTube channel in which he describes his transgender identity and other personal interests is also a way Joe connects to other transgender and trans-friendly people on the Internet. He explains that the Internet has been a large source of connection to the transgender community as well as other social communities.

Joe was the most online connected participant of the four participants who were part of this study. Joe's identity development began in a similar way to the other participants, vis-à-vis his feelings of being different and not fitting in with his peers. Joe described that his social role in his peer group evolved into what would be perceived from an outsider as a masculine role of protector and honorable friend, so he feels that this softened the shock when he came out to friends in school that he was transgender. Joe not only discovered the term transgender on the Internet and researched it thoroughly,

but became an active member of the cosplay community, which was fully accepting of his transgender identity. The unique aspect of the cosplay community is that male and female participants often dress up as opposite gender characters, or are even challenged by characters that are gender-less. This provided Joe with an open forum to connect with and befriend like-minded people who would support his transition and coming out beyond anything he would find in his local rural area. Joe explained he understood this and was forgiving toward the people he encountered locally for their lack of understanding. Joe also created a series of vlogs about his transition, and other aspects of his life, which he explained helped him help others who were struggling to find information.

Jessica

Demographics. Jessica is a 40-year-old MTF transgender person from a small town in northwest Lower Michigan. Jessica currently lives in the same town she grew up in, which is a small town of approximately 5,000 people spread out over a large area. Jessica's family and extended family mostly live in this same town, as well as with most everyone she attended school. Jessica currently lives with her parents after recently selling her home to save money for her gender confirmation surgery. Jessica has been transitioning for approximately 4 years and has been out for 3 years to a small number of friends and family.

Jessica has 3 older half-siblings from her mother and father's previous relationships and 1 younger full sibling. Jessica's parents are still married; 2 of Jessica's siblings live in the same town while the other 2 live out-of-state. She has a good

relationship with 2 of her siblings and a distant relationship with the other 2 because of ”who I am”. Jessica works full time as a paramedic for a local hospital, which she has been her career for many years prior to coming out. Her employer is supportive and has changed her gender in the human resources system so that some of her medical treatment is covered, such as hormone therapy and a recent breast augmentation surgery. Jessica is currently advocating with her employer to have transgender medical services added to the hospital insurance policy so that she can undergo gender confirmation surgery using her insurance. Jessica plans to move out-of-state after the gender confirmation surgery to “start fresh in a new place”. Jessica also works for a local hospital and was an easily recognized member of her community because of her job.

Case summary. Jessica described that she knew her identity was female from a young age, around 7 or 8 years old. Jessica explained “I remember wanting have my ears pierced, just like in everything that they like, playing Barbies, house and for me, I always have to be the girl when we played house, or played Barbies”. Jessica remembers that her brothers often tried to get her involved with what they were interested in, but she did not like the same things and would avoid them to go wear her mother’s clothes and spending time with other female family members. Jessica remembers this time as shameful, stating:

> I remember we lived out in the country and I just remember being in this open space and just yelling up at the sky at this, ‘Help me figure this out, God’ and ‘Why did you do this to me?’, ‘Why do I feel this way?’ Just very ashamed of myself.

After puberty Jessica came out as a gay man and lived this way for many years, until about 35 years old. She describes this time as “playing Russian Roulette with my life” in that she drank heavily, experienced severe depression, and was very promiscuous without using condoms. She remembers dressing in drag for a community benefit at a local gay bar, which was the first time she had cross-dressed since a child, and it was a pivotal moment for her, “that’s kind of how that unraveled”. Jessica explained that she feels her journey to being a woman is a “fresh start” for her and she describes, “feeling happier” and has “more self-esteem than I can remember in my life”.

Jessica states her first impressions of transgender people were from “Hollywood and The Jerry Springer Show, and the porn industry had an awful picture about how transgender people are or should be or what they look like”. Jessica explained her biggest issue with living in a rural area was “fear for my safety after coming out”. She had lived as a gay man in this same area for many years, but “transitioning to a woman seemed much scarier than coming out as gay”. Jessica was surprised at how her new identity did not “spread like wildfire after coming out”. Jessica discussed her parents’ reaction to her coming out as “painful” and “denying”, Jessica believe this is “because they had seen the same people on television and they were worried.” Furthermore, “I think-- especially in our smaller communities, being alone - I think people have more time to ask you and know an individual a little more on a personal level.” Jessica explained that the Internet was pivotal in her identity development, saying:

> Huge. Completely. I don't think I would be where I'm at today without learning and educating myself from social media and the Internet. It definitely would have been nice if we would have had that 20 years ago, or even 10 years ago.

Jessica had a similar experience in that she felt different as a child, but then identified as a gay man for over 20 years, and lived in that community all the while feeling unfulfilled and unhappy as evidenced by her drinking and unprotected sexual encounters. Jessica explained she knew about transgender people, but did not feel she was like them until she performed in drag one night at a local gay bar, which triggered a flood of memories and feelings she had not experienced in many years. This led her to contact a therapist and she began her journey to transitioning. Jessica's unique experience in her community was that she lived in her community of origin, and is an emergency service worker with a strong community presence; essentially her coming out was coming out to the community all at once. Jessica also utilized the Internet for all phases of her transition, mostly in search of information and biographical websites and resource websites for medical and mental health professionals.

The within-case analysis provided rich detail of each case for the reader to understand the context and individual experiences of the participants while coming out and transitioning in a rural area. Below is the cross-case analysis of the interview data only because of partial participant participation and attrition.

Cross-Case Analysis

The within-case section above included the individual cases presented in rich and detailed descriptive language to frame the contextual details of the participants'

experience of transitioning from one gender to another in a rural area. The next section, the cross-case analysis, will include the interview data as this was the only phase of research completed by all four participants, and was examined through the theoretical foundations and conceptual framework described in Chapter 2. I encountered unusual circumstances during data collection that ultimately led to three of the four individuals discontinuing participation in the study prior to completion of all phases. Participants' lack of transportation was one barrier to meeting for data collection, and getting time away from work was another. The result was such that the interview phase of data collection was the only phase that all participants completed. Because of this, the only valid cross-case analysis that can be performed is on the interview data, while the other forms of data are presented from each participant in the within-case analysis section above. Anecdotal information that emerged from the process of data analysis is presented as it seems valuable to me that the reader have this information to form a complete understanding of the case and to provide context.

Demographic Similarities

During the write up of the participant demographics, a few similarities emerged among them. First, all of the participants are originally from small towns in Michigan. Three of the participants, Andrew, Joe, and Jessica, are all from the same geographic region of Michigan, while Maddie is from a rural town further south. The rural nature of the town the participant was from seemed to encourage fitting in, such as when Maddie described, "I was careful, I didn't go around in dresses really but I really wasn't, around home, I didn't want to advertise it. I just wanted to feel comfortable and I wanted to fit in.

So, really didn't have a lot of confrontation from people.” Maddie also stated she selected the town she currently lives in because “they have a human rights ordinance”. Having a human rights ordinance however, does not seem to impact individual behavior as Andrew describes the prejudice and bullying he experienced during school,

> One guy in particular carved the word 'slut' on my car. That was pretty fun. And then another guy, he made fun of me for like three years, until me and my ex broke up. But it got to the point where when he'd see me driving, he'd try and cut in front of me and try and get me off the road, and stuff like that.

Second, all of the participants had family support networks that were a positive influence on their decision to transition. However, there were no consistent similarities with family structure between participants, i.e., parents were continuously married or divorced, all had siblings some older some younger, etc. All participants identified with the word *family* to mean a blood relative, no participant identified a chosen family. Third, each participant identified that they felt they had community support networks beyond family, which they identified as friends, and all participants said this was a benefit of their rural environment. The participants gave credit to their rural environment for the close relationships they developed with people over a lifetime of experiences, such as living as adults with the same people they went through elementary, middle and high school.

Interviews

The research questions informed the interview questions (see appendix A) during the development of the proposal. During data analysis, interview questions were linked

with research questions to analyze the interviews by comparing responses to particular questions to the research questions of the study. The linkages followed like so:

Central Questions

1. How does a transgender person discover his, her, or hir identity in a rural area that lacks any obvious transgender cultural information? This question is linked to interview questions 1, 3 and 11.

2. What are the experiences a transgender person goes through in his, her, or hir search for an individual transgender identity in a rural area? This question is linked to interview questions 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 9, 10, and 11.

Issue Subquestions

1. How do transgender people find information on transgender culture in a rural area? This subquestion is linked to interview questions 4 and 8.

2. What value does engaging in online activity provide transgender people in rural communities? This subquestion is linked to interview questions 4, 8 and 11.

Topical Subquestions

1. How often and what online resources to transgender people access? This subquestion is linked to interview questions 4 and 8.

2. What are some of the online resources transgender people use to learn more about themselves? This subquestion is linked to interview questions 6, 8, and 9.

3. What are some experiences that transgender people have in the rural communities where they live? This subquestion is linked to interview questions 1, 2, 3, 5, 7, 10, and 11.

4. What types of online interactions do transgender people engage in a rural area? This subquestion is linked to interview questions 6, 8, and 9.

A cognitive map was created to illustrate the relationships that developed between the central questions, issue subquestions, and topical subquestions and the interview questions; see figure 8 below.

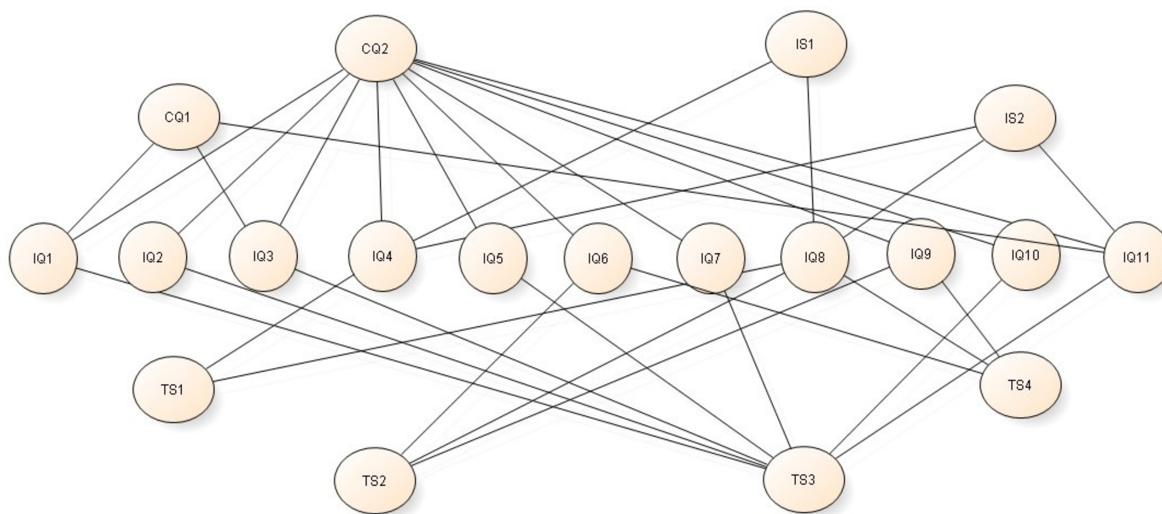

Figure 8. Research Question – Interview Question Map

Each interview question can be traced back to one of the central, issue, or topical research questions. The central research questions provided the guiding influence of the entire study, while the issue subquestions were intended to investigate the issues transgender people face in rural areas and the topical subquestions explored the pragmatic experiences of transgender people in a rural area. The cognitive map above demonstrates how each of the central, issue, and topical research questions is related back to a question from the interview protocol. In NVivo, nodes were created for each of the interview

questions and the interviews were sorted by each of the 11 interview questions to sort the data for a cross-case analysis (Bazeley & Jackson, 2013).

Coding was conducted by first selecting a typical case interview that was considered representative of the other cases. A broad-brush coding technique was used on the first interview to develop an exhaustive list of codes (nodes). The initial lists of codes were developed during the first coding round of the typical case interview. The codes that were developed from the first interview transcript were then used to code the other two interviews, and more codes were added as they emerged. This process generated the following 16 codes: *acknowledging something is different; being told behavior is wrong; early identity; messages about being trans; negative messages; coming out experiences; choosing not to come out; starting over; coping with dissonance; fitting in; online experiences; researching identity; rural experiences; safety; and urban perceptions from a rural perspective*. Once the interviews were coded, I reviewed the list of 16 codes and followed an inductive process of collapsing and reordering the current list of codes into a node tree, or categories. The 5 resulting categories were: *childhood experiences; coming out experiences; coping with dissonance; researching identity; and safety*. These 16 codes and 5 categories were then used to recode the data a second time.

A slicing coding scheme (Bazeley & Jackson, 2013) was used in the second round of coding in which entire paragraphs or sections were coded with multiple themes in slices of the text. During a second round of coding, 7 additional codes were added: *childhood experiences; absence of messages; accessing support; others' reactions; passing; realization; and reaction to research*. The codes were then re-categorized,

which resulted in 6 categories by adding another category of *realization*. A third round of coding did not produce any additional codes or categories, therefore the codes/categories were broken into two themes, namely Identity Development and Rural Experiences (see Table 2 below). The within-case analysis provided additional rich data from interviews to support this structure.

Finally, the interview with Jessica was coded after all three other interviews had been coded and the codes and themes had emerged. Jessica's interview was coded using the same coding structure found in Table 2. One unique code specific only to Jessica's interview was labeled *advocates* and was discovered when coding Jessica's interview. Jessica was discussing her family members' reactions to her coming out and she described one brother who had been "teasing me as a transsexual and just being mean" while he was at his work. Jessica stated that "Knowing people that work there finally got after him and said that's your family. Enough is enough." Table 2 was updated to include this new code.

Table 2.

Codes/Nodes, Categories/Node Tree, and Themes/Classifications

Codes/Nodes	Categories/Node Tree	Themes/Classifications
1. Acknowledging something is different	1. Childhood experiences	Identity Development
2. Being told behavior is wrong	a. Absence of messages	a. Childhood experiences
3. Early identity	b. Acknowledging something is different	b. Absence of messages
4. Messages about being trans	c. Being told behavior is wrong	c. Acknowledging something is different
5. Negative Messages	d. Early identity	d. Early identity
6. Coming out experiences	e. Messages about being trans	e. Coming out experiences
7. Choosing not to come out	f. Negative messages	f. Choosing to transition
8. Choosing to transition	2. Coming out experiences	g. Passing
9. Starting over	a. Accessing support	h. Coping with dissonance
10. Coping with dissonance	b. Choosing not to come out	i. Fitting in
11. Fitting in	c. Others' reactions	j. Realization
12. Online experiences	d. Passing	k. Researching identity
13. Researching identity	e. Choosing to transition	l. Reaction to research
14. Rural experiences	f. Starting over	Rural Experiences
15. Safety	3. Coping with dissonance	a. Being told behavior is wrong
16. Urban perceptions from a rural perspective	a. Fitting in	b. Advocates
17. Childhood experiences	b. Other's reactions	c. Messages out being trans
18. Absence of messages	4. Realization	d. Negative messages
19. Accessing support	5. Advocates	e. Accessing support
20. Others' reactions	6. Researching identity	f. Choosing not to come out
21. Passing	a. Online experiences	g. Others' reactions
22. Realization	b. Reaction to research	h. Starting over
23. Reaction to research	7. Safety	i. Online experiences
24. Advocates	a. Rural experiences	j. Safety
	b. Urban perceptions from a rural perspective	k. Rural experiences
		l. Urban perceptions from a rural perspective

Autocoding by existing patterns is an experimental feature in the NVivo software package (QSR International, Inc., 2012) and was used, in this case, as a test of reliability. Although this feature is not officially approved for use in data analysis, this does provide some anecdotal information about reliability in term of interrater reliability using a comparison of human and computer coding. In other words, this table shows how the program tracked the researcher's own coding behaviors and then coded each interview based on the established coding patterns. The top five codes identified by the software are

listed in Table 3 below from most common to least common. These were identified as common themes after redundancies were removed.

Table 3.

Top 5 Autocode Results by Participant

Autocode of Maddie's Interview	Autocode of Andrew's Interview	Autocode of Joe's Interview	Autocode of Jessica's Interview
1. Being told behavior is wrong	1. Others' reactions	1. Fitting in	1. Accessing support
2. Acknowledging something is different	2. Coming out experiences	2. Coming out experiences	2. Realization
3. Fitting in	3. Childhood experiences	3. Researching identity	3. Passing
4. Coming out experiences	4. Online experiences	4. Online experiences	4. Others' reactions
5. Coping with dissonance	5. Researching identity	5. Coping with dissonance	5. Reaction to research

The resulting themes listed above emerged from coding the interview data until saturation had been achieved (Patton, 2002). In the section below, I will discuss the themes that emerged, were supported by participant statements, and triangulated with theory from the literature. The participants' responses are in quotations to distinguish their words from the researchers.

Queer theory and social constructionist theory were used reflexively throughout the data analysis process in terms of providing some structure to the data. During the process of coding and analysis of the interviews, I read and coded the interview transcript until no more codes emerged then organized codes by theme. The themes were based in queer theory and social constructionist concepts, which are discussed individually below.

Queer theory posits three principle concepts, (1) sexuality and gender are socially, historically, and culturally bound to context and geography (Dean, 1993; Epstein, 1994; Namaste, 1994); (2) sexuality and gender are political aspects of identity that people choose to express in their own ways (Creet, 2000; Namaste, 1994); and (3) a person can express multiple identities of their own choosing (Brown, 2012; Garry, 2011). These three concepts are the driving force behind queer theory politically inasmuch psychologically in terms of individual and social psychology.

The hallmarks of social constructivism theory include (1) reality is relative and constructed of multiple equally valid realities (Andrews, 2012; Lee, 2012; Ponterotto, 2005) and (2) people create their own realities through an intrapsychic process of reflection and introspection (Andrews, 2012). Social constructionist theory best explains transgender identity development from a personal narrative point of view in which a transgender person must create their new reality through the transition process once they discover their transgender identity.

Theme One: Identity Development

The analysis below is presented as two dominant themes that emerged during data analysis. Each theme section is divided into categories that correspond to the theme.

Childhood experiences. Most of the participants explained their identity development began in early childhood in terms of feeling differently, and receiving messages from those around them that their behavior did not fit the norm for their biological gender. Andrew remembered, “having friends over and we’d play Superman and stuff and a lot of just male things versus playing with Barbies or dolls”. From a

young age, Maddie explained, “I don’t remember a lot of specific messages. I remember from my parents it was largely unspoken. It was the glances, from my dad”. Maddie also remembered “he would say things not to me, but in my vicinity in order to get my attention. Things about sissies and stuff”. At school, Maddie did not fit in either and remembered the “boys going Faggot! Faggot! Faggot!” and “I wasn’t going to be changing schools” because of the rural area she grew up in there was no alternative. Jessica remembered, “I have two older brothers and they would try to get me to have the same interests or do the same things that they would do” and “I remember just having fear going down to the bus stop. My mom would have to walk me down there because kids would tease me because I was feminine back then”. Andrew also received discouraging messages from his parents, “My parents would always bring up different things that girls would do versus what guys would do”.

Joe provided a discrepant case for this category in terms of a lack of messages received in childhood about how boys and girls acted and behaved. Joe explained that he identified as male as a child and “no one said anything different”. Joe went on to explain “I didn’t really even think about it as different, or weird, or anything more than just me being a human”. Joe described his experience growing up saying “A lot of kids felt entitled towards picking on other kids, and so I basically became this like alpha protector” and “A lot of the guys kind of accepted me as a guy because I was tough”. Joe seemed to experience positive messages from peers that his behavior was acceptable in the group because of his “protector” role.

All of the participants recognized from an early age that there was something different about them. Andrew remembered feeling different as far back as "probably preschool", while Jessica reportedly remembered "I think that goes back to when I was seven, eight years old, just not feeling right". Maddie and Joe were the oldest to come to realize they were different from other people. This occurred during their junior high school years. Maddie stated, "it would have been around 7th or 8th grade", while Joe stated "as I started hitting puberty and stuff". All of the participants reported feeling like something was different about them compared to other people, but could not identify that it was related to gender.

The concept of multiple identities came up in subtle ways in the interviews with participants. Maddie described, "I changed my personality. I adopted a personality that matched, that got along" while still holding onto her previous identity that she learned did not fit in. Jessica explained the confusion the various identities caused when she was a teenager, "like you're either gay or straight, boy or girl and one or the other? I just never - I must be gay. That explains it. That's what unfolded" before she discovered her transgender identity.

Joe also discussed his identity development in school where he became the "alpha male" in his peer group after gaining a reputation for standing up for other students. Joe also remembers when he began experiencing puberty and thinking "Oh, I'm not a girl. Hey, wait. But I'm a boy. Why is this so different than the rest of the guys around me?" Seeing others also inspired Joe, as he puts it, "I am who I am and I'm proud of it".

The next sections of this chapter address trustworthiness and the results section, which provides an analysis of how well the data address the interview questions.

Coming out experiences. There were several examples of all the participants creating their own reality/personal narrative in the interview data. Maddie described a process of "adopting a personality" that fit in while she was a teenager, getting "glances" from her father when she was not "acting appropriately" as a child for her birth gender, through a "bad marriage" and "adopting as much manly stuff as I could" until she reached a point where she was able to and had decided to transition. At the time of the study, Maddie had not come out to very many family members or friends from her hometown and stated "I don't intend to" because she did not feel anyone but her close friends needed to know. Maddie told a story about how she fully acknowledged herself for the first time standing in front of a mirror in a hotel room on a business trip to Florida and that she needed to express her identity in order to remove the stress of avoiding her genuine self.

All participants commented that they felt a "need" to transition, and had to self-advocate overcoming resistance toward their new identity from family members or other people in their lives. Maddie summed up this idea when she stated, "If you've decided to transition, you decide". When he talked about attending Catholic school, Andrew explained that his new identity would put him in jeopardy of being "frowned upon … all the time, and I didn't want any of that". Andrew eventually changed schools and came out, and made political buttons about LGBTQ awareness for a school project. Joe experienced family conflict based in his stepfather's religious beliefs, "my mother just

married into a very conservative family, and I was literally told to apologize to her husband for being transgender", but continued to come out anyway and live as a man. Jessica advocated for herself with her employer, who switched her gender marker on her human resources file so she could receive hormone treatment and it would be covered by insurance, and she was writing a self-advocacy letter around the time of the interview that asked her employer to add transgender benefits to the insurance policy. These are some examples of stories the participants shared during the interviews of how they self-advocated to express their identity in their world.

Jessica explains she felt "Angry to the point where… I've tried every antidepressant possible" but after seeing a therapist and discovering her identity that "it definitely does make me a stronger person today, going through all that". Jessica explains her evolving identity in feeling terms, "I have to feel it. I have to feel that change. I have to feel I don't want you to be addressing me as a woman when I don't look like a woman" in the early phase of her transition and later "I could feel in the moment its right, which is so overwhelming for me". Jessica talked about dealing with the public in her job in the medical profession and how her co-workers sometimes refer to her as her male given name, which she explained "I tell the patients that sometimes I go by my middle name when they slip up".

The issue of *passing,* which is a transgender person's ability to be perceived as their preferred gender without causing suspicion in the general public, came up for Andrew and Maddie during the interviews. Andrew discussed his high school experiences and explained coming out and being around people "got easier when I started

passing". Andrew also talked about his voice and "I never really had a feminine voice" and so "I got really happy when I started passing".

Maddie talked about her experiences of transitioning in her home town before moving to the town she lives in now, and how passing seemed to be easier than she thought. Maddie explained, "very rarely did I see someone that I knew. When that happened, never once did I get called out on it".

Coping with dissonance. The term dissonance seemed to fit the participants' experiences of feeling different, so it was used in this code in terms of developing coping skills for handling the situations that came up for the participants during their identity development. Andrew explained "I'd go in my brother's room and put his clothes on all the time, because I didn't like the feeling of girl clothes. They'd make me get sick to my stomach and I would throw up all the time". Andrew learned to dress in male style of clothes to avoid the nausea he experienced while wearing girl's clothes.

Joe also felt different when wearing girl's clothes or things "that people thought were cute or feminine and tried to emulate it, but there was always this not quite sick, but this wrong feeling in the pit of my stomach". Joe explained he would try "to go more on a gender neutral side of [dressing], wearing things like slim t-shirts, and sweaters, and stuff like that to where it could really go either way".

Jessica talked about struggling with her identity for many years before coming to terms with her transgender self. She explained, "Even though I didn't feel depressed, I knew I had some type of depression because I was acting out, and being promiscuous,

and making bad choices. Just playing Russian roulette with my life". Eventually she entered therapy where she processed her feelings and started to come out.

Realization. In this context, the category realization emerged as a point in time in which the participant had an epiphany or *ah-ha* moment that they were transgender and everything seemed to fit in place. Two of the participants had pivotal moments in which they discovered the term *transgender* and immediately knew it applied to them. Andrew explained "It feels like everything just went into place then, because I finally knew" after doing some research when he first heard the term *transgender*. Jessica explained that "I was asked to do a drag show for a benefit to raise money for kids with Tourette's… I just remember these old feelings and it just came unraveling".

Participants shared that they learned things specifically about transgender people as they were growing up through media outlets. Andrew shared that he had been "watching Dancing with the Stars with my brother, and Chaz Bono came on that night. I didn't know who he was, then my parents explained it to me". Jessica presented a different experience when she learned about transgender people and stated "Hollywood and The Jerry Springer Show and the porn industry painted an awful picture about how transgender people are or should be and how they look".

Researching identity. The last category under the identity development theme in this analysis is researching identity, or the process by which the participant went about finding more information after discovering the term *transgender.* All of the participants said that they used the Internet as a resource for information over all other sources of information. Andrew explained after his parents told him about Chaz Bono, "I didn't

know who he was, then my parents explained it to me. Then I Googled it because I wanted to know what it meant". Andrew also said "I use the Internet as a source way more than I do reading".

Joe explained he used the Internet to socialize often and he discovered a friend's personal vlog (video blog) on the Internet and "I saw a vlog on their personal channel… saying they were coming out" and later "I looked for so much online information". Joe went on to describe that he "researches the crap out of anything" and spent many hours online researching "video blogs, and regular blogs, and informational sites, and healthcare sites". Joe has also met other "transgender people in the Michigan cosplay community" through online social networks. When asked about how the Internet influenced her transition and researching her identity, Jessica responded emphatically "Huge. Completely. I don't think I would be where I'm at today without educating myself from social media and the Internet".

Theme Two: Rural Experiences

Advocates. Jessica provided unique information for this category, and was the only participant to do so. She was answering a question from the protocol about her coming out experiences with her family, specifically her older brother. She described his behavior as "extremely negative or just at [his] work teasing me as a transsexual and just being mean. Knowing people that work there, finally they got after him and said that's your family. Enough is enough". Jessica explained that because of the rural area, she knows people who work with her brother and had heard about what he was saying at

work and the incident when his co-workers confronted him. This was the only occurrence of this phenomenon in all the interview data.

Safety. Another prominent category in the rural experiences theme was safety, often described by participants as “rumors” or “judgmental” actions or policies toward them. Andrew talked about “rumors” specifically when he was attending Catholic school and changed schools because of “judgmental” policies. Andrew talked about “feeling like a ghost” when he transferred schools until he was able to meet other people, but he explained the attitudes he experienced changed based on his identity, “I got more crap from guys that I did girls, I got more crap from girls when they knew I was a lesbian and then when I came out as transgender, it was more guys”. Andrew also experienced “one guy carved the word slut on my car” and “another guy made fun of me for like three years” and “when he’d see me driving, he’d cut in front of me and try to get me off the road”. But after leaving high school “no one really bothered me”.

Jessica also experienced harassment as a child, “I remember just having fear going down to the bus stop” and “My mom would have to walk me down there because kids would tease me”. Jessica also experienced some harassment at work from her supervisor when the conversation came up in the cafeteria and he commented, “Well just keep in mind that I hired [name omitted] with a ‘Y’ and not an ‘I’”. Other incidents occurred at work for Jessica when her supervisor and coworkers would ask “Do you really have to wear those?” and “Well it offends [name omitted]”. Jessica even stated her feelings bluntly by saying “I think about my safety at the end of the day”. Jessica described a situation when she was at a straight bar presenting as female and a group of

gay men she knew from the gay bar in town walked in and “I felt like I was literally going to throw up. Just because I was so afraid. That fear of them outing me”.

Maddie described how she “adopted a new personality” in junior high school to fit in a avoid getting harassed and called names. She stated further “I specifically remember having and thinking to myself about it, that I have a different personality at home with my parents”. Joe was discrepant in this category in that he did not describe any point of feeling afraid before or after his identity developed.

Rural experiences. The participants’ experiences living in a rural area while they developed their transgender identity were specifically addressed in the interview questions. These yielded rich information about how the participants perceived their experience as different from someone in an urban environment. Andrew stated “we’re kind of smaller, and we do things different, so people are going to act different”. Andrew also perceived the town he lives in as “diverse, but not as diverse as Chicago or Grand Rapids”. Jessica explained a feeling of “being alone”, she went on to describe “I think people have more time to ask up and know an individual a little more on a personal level”. Jessica also felt that in a bigger city “you have more resources than you do here”. Maddie described the difference as “night and day” between urban and rural areas. Maddie illustrated the difference between urban and rural areas by saying “I think you could walk down the street naked and nobody would look at you [in a large city]”.

This difference was also perceived, as there were more resources in a larger city than where the participants currently reside. Finding and accessing support, another category related to urban and rural differences, seemed to emerge from the interviews

also. Maddie described “there’s a lack of confrontation [in a rural area] but that means there is probably a lack of support”. Maddie also felt that she needed “feedback” on how she was presenting as female and “No one’s giving me feedback in the big city”. Maddie also described feeling “isolated” growing up and during the time she was searching for her identity. She stated:

> I just don’t fit in, anywhere. I don’t fit with the girls. I don’t fit with the boys. … there is this very strong isolation you feel. That’s the hardest thing, it trying to figure out where you fit in the world. … There was just no info, there was nothing. There was less than nothing because it was a case of, there was not even anyone to go talk to. It’s the type of thing where you can’t even go talk to your teacher because you know other people are going to find out. You’ve got this thing going on and you don’t know what it is.

Joe described the differences between urban and rural when he said “although there’s definitely less people, there’s also less people, so whereas, it’s good because you don’t have to come out to as many people, it also means you can’t blend in”. He went on to say “Once you’re labeled as that weird transgender person, then you know people definitely know that”. Joe also noted that he did not feel “like I don’t have a lot of the resources that I could have if I lived in a city”.

Choosing not to come out/others’ reactions. Two categories that seemed related in the rural experience theme was the participant’s decision to choose not to come out and that this decision seemed based on experiential information from their environment. Jessica described this because of her work in emergency medical services (EMS),

specifically when she is working with patients. She talked about times when her co-workers might call her by her birth name and she responds by asking her co-worker “Who’s [name omitted]?”. She also responds in other situations when he co-workers refer to her by her birth name by explaining, “that’s my middle name”.

Maddie explained, “there’s a lot of people I haven’t come out to … and I don’t intend to”. She goes on to explain that she came out, or will come out, to people she “cares enough to talk to, which is my immediate family”. Others, like “old friends, people I used to work with” she would not come out to unless “I run into them on the street, I’m not going to hide from them, but I’m not going to make it a point to go see them to explain any of that”. Maddie stated she “just didn’t want the aggravation” when she thought about telling her neighbors in her hometown, before moving to her current residence. She talked about how she “didn’t want to advertise it. I just wanted to feel comfortable and I wanted to fit in”.

Evidence of Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness factors for this study were outlined in Chapter 3, under the domains of credibility, dependability, transferability, and confirmability. These measures of trustworthiness are the foundation of qualitative study design, and allow the research results to be applied or transferred outside the boundaries of this multiple case study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Miles & Huberman, 1994). Each of the four domains of trustworthiness is discussed below in operationalized language.

Credibility

Outlined in Chapter 3, I elected to utilize prolonged engagement and member checking, which are measures of validity in qualitative studies, to achieve credibility of the study (Creswell, 2013; Patton, 2002; Stake, 1995, 2006; Yin, 2014). Prolonged engagement (Patton, 2002, Stake, 1995, 2006; Yin, 2014) was used to improve credibility, and the goal was to spend between 5-10 hours with each participant during the course of the study. I was able to complete 9 hours of contact time with the first participant, Maddie. After this first case, contact time seemed to decrease with each participant, as 3 hours were spent with Joe, 2.5 hours were spent with Jessica, and 2 hours were spent with Andrew. The deceasing time was based on participant discontinuation from the study after completing some, but not all phases of data collection, and the unusual circumstances encountered during data collection. For example, Joe was only able to meet one time due to transportation issues; therefore, this one contact was longer than other contacts with other participants. The three other participants listed completed two phases (Joe and Andrew) and one phase (Jessica). Maddie's case was typical and most detailed, which allowed for comparison across interview data, as all participants completed this phase. The partial data from other participants is still presented as anecdotal and to add richer detail to the interviews that were conducted.

Member checking (Creswell, 2013; Stake, 2006, Yin, 2014) was completed through email exchanges of the interview transcript sent back and forth between participant and researcher for participant feedback and approval. All transcriptions were reviewed for accuracy and approved by participants. Due to participant discontinuation in

the study, individual cases were not sent to participants for review as discussed in Chapter 3.

Transferability

Transferability was achieved through participant debriefing, using an audit trail, and member checking (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Patton, 2002), and is a measure of reliability in qualitative studies. Participant debriefing occurred following each participant contact activity (Creswell, 2013; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Fifteen to 30 minutes were spent with each participant after interviews for debriefing and field notes were also taken during this time. Debriefing also occurred after each activity, i.e., the interview, artifact review, participant-observations, and art project, with each participant. The audit trail was captured through the use of NVivo qualitative data analytic software and a dissertation research journal in which field notes were taken, and other processing notes were completed. Memos that were written from field notes were emailed back and forth between participant and researcher to complete member checking.

Dependability

Triangulation and the use of an audit trail were used to achieve dependability (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Stake, 1995), which is a measure of reliability and validity of qualitative studies. Data and theoretical triangulation were achieved through discussion between the research and two committee members, in terms of data collection and analysis procedures and applying a theoretical foundation to the results of the data and research questions. The process of participant recruitment, data collection, and data analysis were triangulated by researcher communication with committee members, the

research questions, and theoretical foundation of the study. The audit trail was completed through the NVivo software and the research journal.

Confirmability

Confirmability is a measure of reliability in qualitative studies by discussing researcher bias and transparent methodological processes (Janesick, 2011; Miles & Huberman, 1994; Patton, 2002). Confirmability was achieved by providing a biographical sketch of my life for the reader to review, a self-interview conducted via email between my dissertation chair and I as a reflexive activity, and providing an audit trail through the research journal and NVivo software. The biographical sketch is attached as an appendix to the study (see Appendix D) and the results of the self-interview are presented at the beginning of this chapter.

Results

This section contains the results of the study as they relate to the research questions and themes identified in the data analysis section. I expanded on the fieldwork and discussed how each research question is answered through the multiple sources of data collected from participants. This section was organized according into two parts, one that addresses the research questions specifically and another that presents within-case and between-case descriptive analysis by participant. This allowed the presentation of the data by answering the research questions from the perspective of individual participants and collectively bound together.

Research Questions

The research questions most central to this study were (a) How does a transgender person discover his, her, or hir identity in a rural area that lacks any obvious transgender cultural information? and (b) What are the experiences a transgender person goes through in his, her, or hir search for an individual transgender identity in a rural area? The issue subquestions are (a) How do transgender people find information on transgender culture in a rural area? and (b) What value does engaging in online activity provide transgender people in rural communities? The topical subquestions are (a) How often and what online resources to transgender people access?; (b) What are some of the online resources transgender people use to learn more about themselves?; (c) What are some experiences that transgender people have in the rural communities where they live?; and (d) What types of online interactions do transgender people engage in a rural area? The data were collected through various sources, including semi-structured interviews, artifact analysis, participant-observation, YouTube video-blog review, and an art project completed by a participant to answer these questions. The data were analyzed using NVivo qualitative data analysis software through organizing, memoing, coding, and conceptual modeling.

The demographics addressed the central research questions of the study by focusing on participants who identified as transgender and currently live in a rural area. The hallmark trait of the participants was that they discovered themselves, came out, and transitioned in the rural area. These experiences were valuable and central to this study. The issue subquestions of the study pertain to how transgender people find information and the value of online resources and communities for transgender people in a rural area.

All participants identified that the online resources and communities were instrumental in incorporating their transgender identity into their self-concept and to learn the basics of transitioning from others who were more experienced, e.g., from YouTube videos and blogs of other trans people. Lastly the topical subquestions are addressed through the participants' demographics in that they are all transgender identified persons living in a rural area who have acknowledged significant online research and interactions, either direct or indirect, with other people who identify as transgender. Therefore, the research questions guided the selection of the participants of the study through purposeful sampling (Creswell, 2009, 2013; Patton, 2002).

Central questions. The interviews thoroughly addressed both of the central questions in this study in terms of how a transgender person discovers their identity and what experiences they go through in a rural environment. All of the participants explained a feeling of being "different" as a child, and experienced discord between themselves and their social environment because of how they acted or things in which they were interested. Maddie and Jessica both remembered more traditional feminine interests as children. For Maddie, she was interested in "sewing, crocheting, … cooking", while Jessica would be "wearing my mom's clothing and standing in front of her mirror in the bedroom holding up earrings". Both of these women remembered being drawn to more feminine interests and a desire to be more feminine. Joe and Andrew experienced something similar, but were both drawn to more masculine interests and desires. Joe described becoming the "alpha" person in the school social hierarchy and felt his role was a "protector", while Andrew "played Superman" instead of "playing with Barbies, or

dolls". Both Joe and Andrew remembered visceral physical reactions to wearing feminine clothing and both thought that this was not usual for girls to feel, before they understood their identity.

In terms of developing their identities in a rural environment, all participants feel as though there were benefits and barriers to coming out in a rural environment. The interview did not specifically ask if they preferred the environment they came out in, but all of the participants described feeling like they "belonged to a community" in the rural area, whereas they would have "more resources" and "feel less isolated" in an urban environment. Jessica experienced others' advocacy when her brother was saying negative things about her coming out at his work place and his co-workers confronted him. All of the participants stressed how important the Internet was in terms of learning about their identity and the nuts-and-bolts of how to go about transitioning from one gender to another.

Issue subquestions. The two issue subquestions intended to explore how transgender people find information and the value of online resources for transgender people in a rural area. All of the participants explained that the Internet was a fundamental part of their transition. Andrew explained how he Googled information after his parents mentioned the term *transgender.* Maddie and Jessica both explained how the Internet provided them with information about feminine aspects of transitioning, such as make up and clothing. All of the participants had ordered products online from stores that cater to transgender clients. Joe and Andrew had both purchased "binders" from online stores while Maddie and Jessica had purchased "breast forms" and shoes from online

vendors. The overall message was that the Internet was an invaluable resource for their identity development.

Topical subquestions. The four topical subquestions in this study explored practical aspects of online use among the participants, such as how often and what resources were accessed, what learning resources were used, their experiences living in a rural area using online resources, and the types of interactions they had online. All of the participants explained that they searched the term *transgender* after hearing the world and found they related to the world. Besides searching the term *transgender,* participants also accessed the Internet to search for and purchase products to make their transition easier. Maddie and Jessica both purchased breast forms, wigs, and clothing items they could not find in their size in department stores. Personal websites and blogs, even video blogs, were among the websites accessed by the participants while they were searching for information. Maddie was the eldest participant and lived in a very rural area for most of her life, so searching the Internet came later for her. Maddie explained that her hometown only "got Internet in the last 10 or so years" referring to faster-than-dial-up Internet. This limitation was a barrier for Maddie until she was able to access the Internet when not at home.

Summary

The data provided from the interviews with participants answered all of the research questions. The participants' rich experiences in their identity development journeys provided context and details that living in a rural area while they transitioned carried both benefits and barriers. Two of the benefits were that they were part of a

community and they felt they had fewer people to come out to when they transitioned. There was also a theme of isolation and lack of resources, which they had to seek outside sources to find information and products related to transitioning. All of the participants sought help through online resources, such as online marketplaces, personal websites of transgender people, transgender specific websites, and anything else they found while searching the term *transgender.* The data provided by the participants is rich and detailed and tells the story of how they discovered their identity and decided to transition by making it their own journey.

In Chapter 5, I discuss the interpretation of the findings, limitations, recommendations, and implications of the study.

Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

Introduction

This study began with the purpose of exploring the identity development of transgender people residing in rural areas where information about transgender people is unavailable completely or on a limited basis; I also examined how online resources facilitated this development. The participants shared stories that provided a new perspective in the identity development and coming out process of transgender people who live in a rural area, which is a new and unique perspective not present in the literature. In this study, I documented multiple experiences among four rural transgender people and how they acquired knowledge during their identity development process. I proposed that transgender people who live in rural areas develop identities through the acquisition of cultural knowledge, and that the primary sources of this knowledge are online resources because of the lack of an accessible transgender community such as those in urban areas. According to the data, transgender people living in a rural area use the Internet as a primary source for information and connecting with other transgender people while continuing to live in their home area. I focused on the personal experiences of transgender people in rural areas, a population nonexistent in the professional counseling literature, while they acquired knowledge and integrated their own transgender identities. The impact of this research is twofold, first to inform the professional counseling community about the uniqueness of being transgender in a rural area, and second to give a voice to an unrepresented population in the social sciences.

This dissertation research was conducted using a qualitative multiple case study design. The multiple case study design was the best choice to use in this study with the rural geographic location of the study and the limited number of potential participants living in this area (Creswell, 2013; Rudestam & Newton, 2007; Stake, 1995; Yin, 2014). The key phenomenon investigated in this study was the context of the identity development process of transgender people living in a rural area, specifically how identity development occurs through participation in online communities and seeking out online resources. More so, the participants provided rich and detailed information about their own personal stories of transitioning, the reasons they chose to remain in a rural area while transitioning, and their own perceptions of how their experience in a rural area differed from that of a trans person in an urban area.

The key findings of this study were divided into two themes, namely identity development and rural experiences. These two themes naturally emerged from the data during the coding, categorizing, and thematic analysis of the interview data from all participants. Within these themes, the primary findings were the following:

1. Both negative and positive childhood experiences.
2. Coming out experiences that were predictable and unpredictable.
3. Coping with the dissonance of deciding to change and the conflict of practically doing so in a rural area.
4. Realization that the individual was transgender.
5. Unexpected advocates.
6. Researching identity in online resources.

7. Safety, both concern for safety because of the rural area and a feeling of safety because of the rural area.

The findings of this study provided insight into the nature of coming out and living as a transgender person in a rural area. The findings are discussed in more detail in the interpretation section below.

Interpretation of the Findings

In this section, I addressed two parts of interpretation of the data. First, the impact on the professional literature as a result of this study and an analysis of the data in the context of the theoretical and conceptual frameworks also presented in Chapter 2. Second, I discussed the extent to which the findings confirm, disconfirm, or extend the knowledge base of transgender literature compared to the literature review data from Chapter 2. The interpretations were organized by key findings listed in the introduction to Chapter 5.

The findings of this study were remarkable in terms of the variety of experiences offered by the participants, coming from a population with virtually no literature in the academic canon. Essentially there were four distinct coming out stories with the common theme that the Internet provided them with information and emotional confidence to come out and find ways of making their transition work where they lived without relocating to a larger metropolitan area.

Maddie and Jessica were both similarly aged and identified as MTF persons. Both of them grew up in rural areas, and eventually discovered themselves, came out, and transitioned in rural areas. Their experiences differed in unique ways in that Maddie

made an intentional decision to conform to a life that was not genuine, which led to trouble in her marriage and psychological wellbeing. Jessica also lived a life that was not genuine, but unlike Maddie, Jessica lived as a gay man. This difference did not seem to affect their unhappy experiences in their nongenuine lives as they both turned to alcohol and Jessica turned to unprotected sex as coping skills. Once they allowed themselves to integrate a transgender identity into their psyches, they were able to explore how to transition and moved in that direction, which alleviated much of the psychological issues both were experiencing as a result of not coming out.

Andrew and Joe were both younger and FTM persons, in strong contrast to Maddie and Jessica's identities and experiences. Andrew and Joe both identified and came out as transgender in high school, but they reached this place in unique ways. Andrew experienced his identity first as a lesbian, but when he heard his parents use the word transgender he immediately turned to the Internet for research and came to realize that this was his true identity. Joe first projected a masculine persona in his peer group, who then seemed to easily accept him when he came out as transgender, and he did not seem to have much trouble after coming out except for some family members. Joe then became interested in cosplay, which provided an outlet for experimentation in changing his outward appearance in many forms. Joe described that it was the norm for men to dress in feminine character suits and vice versa, so he was able to explore his identity in fiction and reality over time in a supportive community. The community was also unique in that it was almost entirely an online community, except for times when they met at conventions. Joe not only used the Internet to gather informational and biographical

websites, but he also used it to interact with others, make friends, and engage in a virtual community, which included making his own vlogs where he described his thoughts and feelings about transitioning in an online forum.

The impact on professional mental health counseling literature is more fully discussed below; however, there is something important of note in interpreting the results of the data analysis, namely the importance the Internet plays in identity development. The pattern that emerged from all four participants was that they heard about, read, or somehow came in contact with the term transgender, which then triggered them to seek more information. The one place they all turned to immediately was the Internet and online sources. All four participants described the hours they spent online researching biographic and information websites, how-to websites, resource websites, and others including watching vlogs and reading discussion boards. The research provided various results in terms of individual experiences in the participant's lives and paths toward transition, but the common theme was that they all turned to the Internet for information and they did so as a first step in the identity development process.

Queer Theory

Queer theorists posit that sexuality and gender are socially, historically, and culturally bound (Dean, 1993; Epstein, 1994; Namaste, 1994), the political aspect of gender identity that people are able to choose their gender (Creet, 2000; Namaste, 1994), and the multiplicity of identities hypothesis that people carry many identities and no one identity is more valued than another (Brown, 2012; Garry, 2011). The notion that gender is rooted in social, historical, and cultural systems is evident, especially in the childhood

experiences of the participants. The literature from Chapter 2 contained several conflicting ideas and theories about gender and childhood experiences. One hypothesis is that social norms based on gender are assigned by biological sex and are reinforced in early developmental stages of childhood, which then remain throughout adolescence and adulthood through the individual's gender identity and expression (Diekman & Goodman, 2006; Fagot, Leinbach, & O'Boyle, 1992), mostly through intra-family behaviors (Poeschl, 2008). The participants supported the notion that parents, teachers, and others assigned gender roles in the participant's life in childhood and that gender variant behavior was discouraged, admonished, and criticized. Maddie explained that her father would "give me looks" that signaled her "behavior was not how a young boy should behave," Jessica shared that she "felt fearful" to the point where her mother walked her to the bus stop to avoid being bullied by other students because of her perceived feminine behavior. Joe and Andrew experienced negative remarks at school and at home as well, including Andrew's experience of being harassed by a single male classmate who damaged his vehicle and attempted to "run me off the road." All participants noted that their families were the point at which they began to know that their genuine gender expression (e.g., how they felt on the inside) did not match how they should behave among others and they had to alter their behavior to fit the prescribed social norm. I stopped reviewing here. Please go through the rest of your chapter and look for the patterns I pointed out to you. I will now look at your references.

The participants seemed to redefine and renegotiate their gender identities despite the dissuading messages. Jessica and Maddie appeared to experience more negative

messages than Andrew and Joe, which could be evidence of a generational gap between the two sets of participants. Jessica began to question the messages she received about gender once she was in therapy while Maddie seemed to question her gender role after doing some Internet research on the term transgender. Andrew and Joe also seemed to begin questioning their gender roles also after doing some Internet research. Joe utilized the Internet in the most unique manner in connecting with other cosplayers, which also seemed to facilitate his transgender identity development. Being a cosplayer seemed to allow Joe to expand his identity in terms of transitioning to a new identity by wearing clothes that crossed genders. Once all the participants came to internalize the research they discovered they began to re-write the narratives of their lives to match the internal experiences they felt about their gender.

The context of the gender role is a primary evaluation tool of prescriptive beliefs, or beliefs that are prescribed onto another person by individuals in society (Diekman & Goodfriend, 2006); thereby declaring a gender that is in opposition to prescribed beliefs is often labeled a political act, or that the person has 'an agenda'. Context in society is defined by social norms and how people are "supposed to" do things in life, such as work, have a family, etc. All of the participants noted that there were expectations placed on them by people in their social worlds that conflicted with their natural tendency toward their own unique gender expression. For some, like Maddie, the corrective looks her father gave her seemed to stifle her identity and push her to "adopt a personality that matched" what others expected of her. Jessica explained that her brothers tried to get her "to do things they would do as a boy" but she would go back to dressing in her mother's

clothes and earrings. Examples like these are littered throughout the interviews in which the participant received a message from a person in their world that their behavior was not “right for a boy/girl” and they needed to change to fit in. In these cases, the message remained the same despite the context it originated from, i.e., work, school, or family. The participants all experienced prescriptive beliefs about how to be in the gender they were assigned at birth, which created psychological conflict for them. The conflict seemed to be the motivating factor for the participants in researching the term transgender and turning to the Internet, which seemed to provide them with some anonymity and a way for them to discover more about themselves. The Internet was an outlet for the participants to gain knowledge without fear of judgment or reprisal for their identities, which was helpful in terms of allowing for the participants to explore without consequences.

There was also evidence from literature that the perceptions of and value regarded in gender roles are malleable, gender role perception was not as difficult to change as once thought, and that gendered spaces exist in the social zeitgeist and are permeable in terms of men found in traditionally women’s roles and vice versa (Doan, 2007; Diekman & Goodfriend, 2006). In the case of Maddie, she decided to quit her career as an engineer when she began transitioning to full time female, relocated to a new area, and was looking for employment outside of the engineering field. For Maddie, her identity as an engineer seemed to conflict with her identity as a female and she decided to let this go with relative ease. This spoke to the notion that perception and value in gender role are malleable in Maddie’s ability and choice to leave her engineering career, and that it was

not as difficult to change as previously thought based on the ease that Maddie was able to make the career transition. Jessica had the ability and choice to keep her career in emergency medical services and did so also with relative ease. Jessica was also able to convince her employer to change her gender marker on her human resources paperwork in order to have her hormone therapy covered by insurance, solely based on her declared gender identity. Lastly, Joe's experiences in his cosplay world strongly supported the malleability of gender role value and the ease in which gender role perceptions can change in the gender variant, gender crossing, and androgynous characters portrayed in cosplay.

The multiplicity of identities hypothesis (Brown, 2012; Garry, 2011) is also evident in participant interview data in that they consider themselves more than how they identify their gender. The multiplicity of identities hypothesis is represented in Figure 9 below.

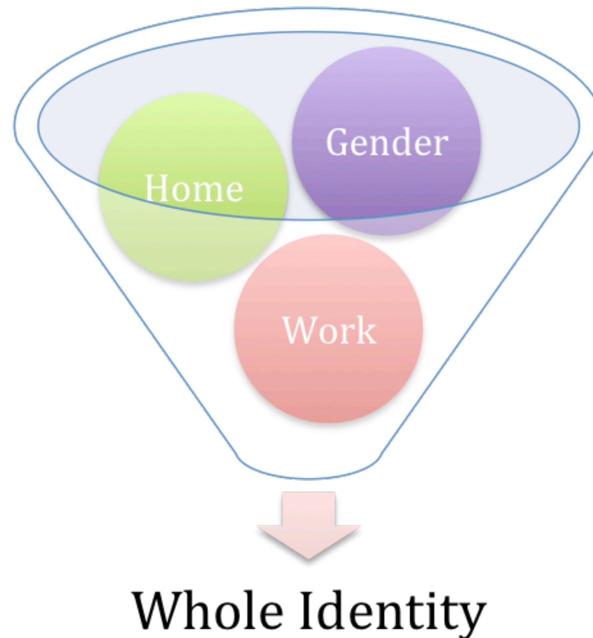

Figure 9. Multiplicity of Identities

The figure depicts the potential multiple identities a person may carry, funneled into the whole identity that is the aggregated sum of the all the separate identities, and makes the person unique and ‘who they are’. The participants all discussed how their lives have been shaped by the discovery of their transgender identity, and they all expressed that they are more than being transgender. This was most evident in Joe’s discussion of his cosplay experiences in putting on different costumes that he chose based on his interest rather than by gender, i.e., Joe role-played female and male characters based on his interest in them. Although this was a more superficial example in which the participant literally puts on a new identity, it was representative of the multiple identities that everyone carries with them and as people we choose what identity comes out based on situation and environment. Maddie also voiced her need to “adopt a personality” that fit

in with the people she was around in school and at home to avoid conflict. In this case, Maddie was not able to express her genuine identity, but she created other identities that fit with what was expected of her; however, the genuine identity did not disappear, but emerged at various times during Maddie's adult years when she would experiment wearing women's clothing on business trips. Therefore, the multiple identities that a person carries around with them may be genuine, may not be genuine, or may be a mix of the two, see Figure 10 below.

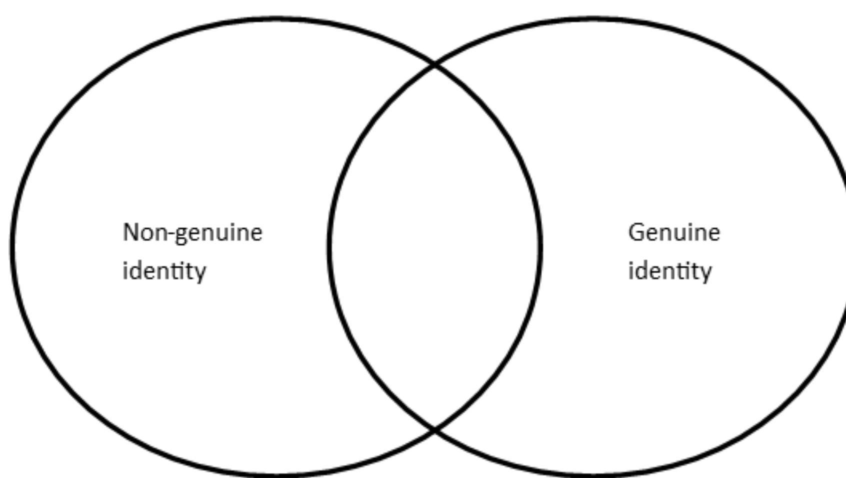

Figure 10. Genuine/Non-genuine Identity

The figure above depicts the potential identities that an individual may express to others in their social world. The context of the environment may be directly related to the chosen expression, based on the participant's explanations of how they choose to present. Maddie's adoption of different "personalities" and Joe's cosplay activities are examples from the data that supported this concept. The subject of genuine versus non-genuine identities was germane to the theory of social constructivism, discussed below.

Social Constructivism

Social constructivism can be broken down into two prominent hypotheses. First, that reality was relative to the individual from that person's perspective, or the emic point of view (Andrews, 2012; Lee, 2012; Ponterotto, 2005), and second that people are able to create their own realities (Andrews, 2012), similar to queer theory but from a broader perspective. This theoretical foundation supported gender was therefore an individual reality that was created by a person, and that this reality was fluid over time. There were several examples from the participants in their transition from one gender identity to another in which they exhibited the malleability of gender identity from a social constructionist foundation.

Jessica is one such case that demonstrates this concept. At first Jessica identified with feminine objects and she incorporated this into the identity of being a gay man. Her identity as a gay man persisted over many years, but she often turned to substances and unprotected sex with other men, possibly as a result of not expressing her genuine identity as described above. It was only when she participated in a drag show and dressed in drag that it triggered her genuine identity and she began to explore this in therapy. After a time in therapy she acknowledged her genuine identity as female and began to redefine herself by expressing her female identity. Jessica's case exemplifies her changing identity over time, which was facilitated by participating in a drag show, therapy, and Internet research.

Andrew was another example of this evolving identity created by the individual. At first Andrew identified as lesbian and carried that identity until he learned the term

transgender while watching television with his parents. When Andrew saw Chaz Bono and asked about him, his parents explained he was transgender and Andrew immediately conducted a search on the Internet, thereby discovering his own transgender identity. After a time of reflection, he came out to his friends and family and moved forward with his transition.

These two cases represented the concept that gender was individually constructed, but facilitated by the social environment. Jessica identified as a gay man for many years until she was invited to participate in a drag show, which was the catalyst of her second identity transformation as a transgender woman. Andrew had a similar, but abbreviated experience, based on his identity as a lesbian, the catalyst when he was watching television with his parents, and conducting a thorough Internet search on the term transgender.

Maddie's experience was similar in a way that she identified for a time as male, had a family, and then slowly learned about the term transgender and began integrating this identity as well. Although Maddie did not identify with the LGBTQ community while she was identifying as male, she also experienced a time when she carried an identity that then evolved into a new identity based on gathering new information after many smaller social interactions that facilitated her new transgender identity. Maddie experienced several occasions of wearing women's clothes over her years living as a man and knew about the term transgender, but did not apply it to her own self until many years into her marriage while on a business trip to Florida when she confronted herself in a mirror. It was during this experience that Maddie allowed the transgender identity into

her self-identity and acknowledged that her feelings were genuine and she felt a need to express them.

The participant interviews contained a wealth of data that illustrated and supported both of the theories that comprised the theoretical foundation of this study. Participants both established and followed their identity despite opposition and provided education to others through their own personal journeys. They also created their own realities and lived them as they experienced them, but were also influenced by the social environment. The fact that their social environment was rural seemed to influence their behavior in terms of the choices the participants made in how they came out, when they came how, how they transitioned, and the choices in how to transition. Additionally, the rural nature of the environment necessitated the use of the Internet as a source of information by viewing personal websites of other transgender people, news articles, and videos on sites such as YouTube for how-to information and to review personal stories.

Microaggressions

Sue (2010) describes microaggressions as small acts of discrimination toward an individual by someone who is unfamiliar with or does not understand the other person's identity. A personal example from my own past experiences was when I have come out to someone new and the other person exclaims that they knew another gay person once and they were 'fine'. This is not an overtly aggressive experience, but one that tokenizes the minority individual into a category that needs explanation of being 'fine'. The participants explained some examples of this in the interviews.

All of the participants described that expectations about how they were supposed to behave were communicated through subtle comments or looks while they were growing up. Maddie described how her father would literally “give me a certain look” that communicated he should not be acting the way he was. Jessica explained how she saw her female cousins “getting their ears pierced” or “playing Barbies or house” and she wanted to be doing what they were doing; but when she did engage in that behavior her family members would tease and shame him, or tell her mother what she was doing and “how long will she allow me to go in that path”. Andrew explained how his parents would “always bring up different things that girls would do versus what guys would do”. Andrew interpreted these comments into “expectations of what girls should be playing with”, which may have made him feel uncomfortable or out of place. Joe was somewhat of an outlier in this set of cases as he described how he identified as a boy until puberty when his parents would send “a combination between social messages and trying to fit the image, because I thought that my mom and dad would be disappointed in me if I wasn’t this perfect daughter that they, apparently, I thought they wanted”. But prior to puberty Joe does not remember getting any messages from his parents that he should behave a certain way, and he freely experienced life as a boy. From Joe’s point of view his parents were expecting him to behave a certain way, much like the other participants’ parents.

The microaggressions presented in the participants’ lives appeared to shape their identity as something that was to be suppressed, while they should be conducting themselves like other men or women. The reactions to the behavior implied that they

were doing something socially wrong or undesirable. This led to suppression of their genuine identity for Jessica and Maddie, who then struggled with depression and substance abuse issues in their adult lives. Joe and Andrew were younger during the time the study was conducted and seemed to have less time to suppress their identities, but also the suppression occurred early in their lives, during pre-puberty, and later in high school they both were able to overcome social convention and come out as their genuine selves. The age difference was not the only difference between the four participants, as Jessica and Maddie were both MTF, while Joe and Andrew were FTM, which could be another variable to when and how a transgender person comes out and develops in their identity process.

Mental health professionals will benefit in knowing the nuances of transgender identity development in a rural area in how transgender people need to strike a balance between coming out and safety until they are fully ready to disclose their new identity to the community and live as their preferred gender. The participants' stories support that coming out is something they think about for quite some time before taking any steps, because once the information is in the community, it appeared to spread quickly and this could become a safety issue that mental health professionals need to be cautious about advocating with the transgender client to come out.

Rural Identity

Previously described, rural identity includes concepts such as regulation, neighbor knowledge, and surveillance (Hillyard & Bagley, 2011; Neal & Walters, 2006, 2007). The two dominant discourses that existed in the literature on rural systems included the

rural utopia and the rural crisis (Neal & Walters, 2006). The rural utopia was often depicted as provincial and quaint, oftentimes a more simplified existence, while the rural crisis often highlighted the dearth of adequate basic needs for people who live in the area. Farm life was often romanticized in pop culture and at the same time so was the rural 'hillbilly' who was not wearing shoes.

Participants commented on how they feel the rural area they came out and transitioned in differs from a more urban area following a similar dichotomy. Andrew described where he lives as "more structured when we [LGBTQ individuals] come together" because of the smaller size of the group. Andrew also described the difference stating "we do things different", which seemed to be a proverbial statement about how the area isn't as diverse and that he needed to be more proactive in finding a community to identify with, which isn't always another group of young FTM trans persons. Joe commented that there were fewer people to come out to because of the smaller population, but that "also means you can't blend in". Joe went on to say, "Once you're labeled as that weird transgender person, then you know people definitely know that", while Jessica elaborated and said "It's harder to keep it a secret for longer. It's harder to control your level of being out". All of the participants described that the smaller area meant there was a lack of resources in terms of actually making the transition, such as places to purchase items specific to the transition and medical services often found in larger urban areas. Joe expressed a feeling that "[information] is a lot more accessible" in urban areas, while Jessica explained that there is a strong sense of feeling "alone" in

smaller communities. Despite the feeling of being alone, Jessica also said "I think people have more time to ask about and know an individual a little more on a personal level".

Neal and Walters (2007) described how rural identities were manifested through a process of regulation, neighbor knowledge, and surveillance, which were all connected to neighborhood watchfulness and knowledge sharing within the community. All the participants described that keeping their transition a secret would be, or was, impossible in a rural area where there are fewer people and "everybody knows everybody". Maddie described how she transitioned in her hometown after her divorce and she would be in town, possibly at the grocery store, presenting as female, and she would not notice anyone noticing her. This helped her boost her self-confidence in her ability to transition. Jessica seemed the most concerned about safety and mentioned it throughout her interview. Jessica described occasions of being outed by one of her friends to another person while at a local bar. Jessica explained that it was someone they identified as a friend, and that this connection was somehow supposed to make it safer, which Jessica did not seem to fully believe. The concept of everyone watching and sharing knowledge more in a rural environment was a strong theme in the interviews in terms of coming out and regulating identity within the community.

Mental health educators and supervisors may consider the rural nature of a population as part of the multicultural continuum of human experience and encourage students and supervisees to use this in client conceptualization and treatment methodology. Rural identity development theory is very new in the identity development literature and combining rural identity development with other multicultural theories may

bridge another gap in the multicultural literature canon. Counselors would benefit from thinking about rural psychology and human experience in terms of limitations in some ways, but protective factors and strengths in others.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework for this study was presented in Chapter 2 and incorporated several theoretical foundations, including queer theory, social constructivism, and Rural Transgender Identity Development Theory. Figure 1 is below for continuity and reference.

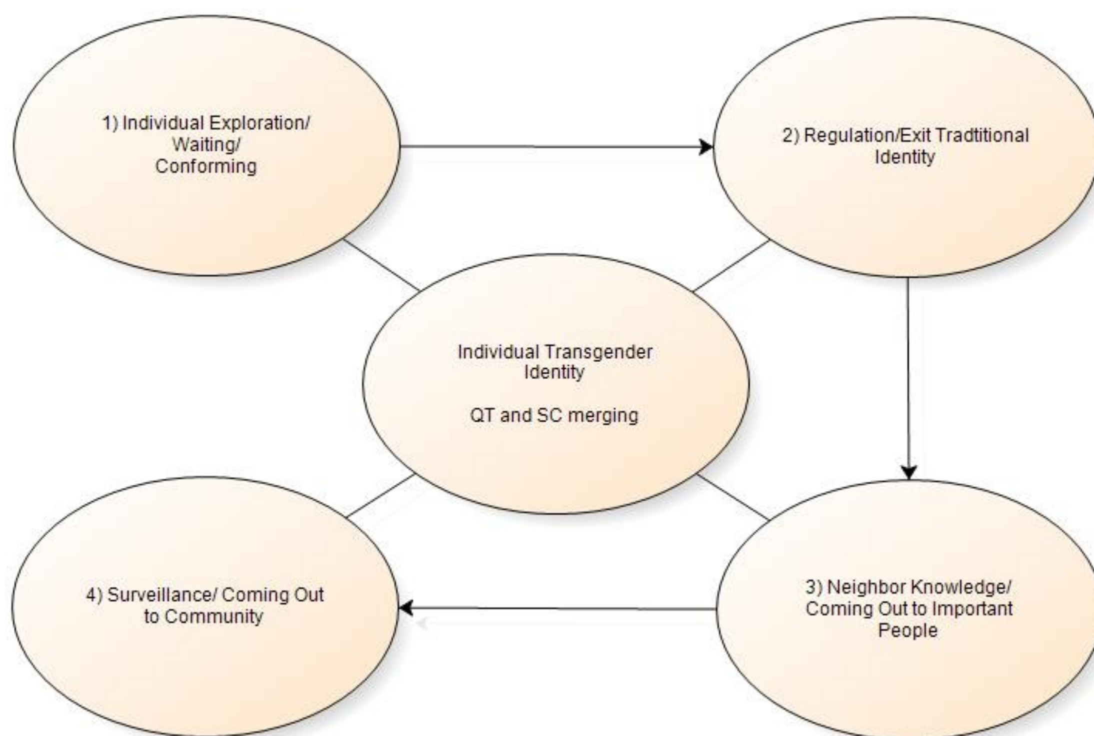

Figure 1. Rural Transgender Identity Development Model

At the heart of the conceptual framework was the merging of queer theory and social constructivism, the two driving forces as the individual person begins to identify as

transgender. This process would occur in the early stages of identity development and begin when the person learns the term transgender and what it means. At this point the person may or may not understand that it applies to his, her, or hir life, but in most cases in this study the person seemed to have a sudden moment of knowing that this term applied to them. Maddie was the exception in this study in that she knew about and learned about the term, while at the same time dressed in women's clothing on and off for year, before fully acknowledging that this term applied to her.

The identity development process proceeds from there through a series of stages the individual moves through, which include a) individual exploration/waiting/conforming, b) regulation/exit traditional identity, c) neighbor knowledge/coming out to important people, and d) surveillance/coming out to community. These stages were linear, but fluid, so that the individual may be experiencing regulation and a life event, such as a move or meeting a new person occurs, and they move backward to the first phase. Each of these stages was described in further detail below.

Individual Exploration/Waiting/Conforming. During this stage, the participants seemed to bide their time and learn as much as they could online and through other sources. All participants shared that they spent countless hours online researching everything they could about being transgender. While they were doing this, they continued to live in the role they had always lived in and were not coming out or transitioning. Each of the participants had heard the term transgender at some point and began researching the word for more information about the definition and how to

transition. They most often seemed to use video websites, such as YouTube, for much of the information, but they also utilized online retailers to purchase some of the items needed to transition because they were unavailable from stores in the area. The participants all gradually began purchasing items and moved into the next stage.

Regulation/Exit Traditional Identity. During this stage the participants seemed to begin to come out to people they felt closest to, which were a mix of family members and friends. The participants also began to wear clothing that matched their preferred gender, even if it was only in the privacy of their homes. Maddie explained how she had women's clothing in her closet on and off for years, and occasionally went through purges where she would get rid of everything, only to buy it back at a later time. This cycle seemed to repeat until she made a connection with her transgender identity and then the clothing was not thrown out again. Joe and Andrew seemed to have the easiest time with this phase having identified as LGBTQ or gender variant at some point before understanding they were transgender, at which point they started identifying as transgender and began to live in that identity. For Jessica, this began after doing the drag show and beginning to see a therapist. Each person had his, her, or hir own unique way of moving into this stage and there did not seem to be a definite time frame for this to occur.

Neighbor Knowledge/Coming Out to Important People. This stage seemed to overlap with stage 2 in some respects in that the younger participants, Joe and Andrew, began to exit their traditional identity and immediately move toward coming out to important people. For Jessica and Maddie, they both seemed to begin the psychological process of exiting the traditional identity, but did not come out to anyone until they had

started to transition and there was no way to hide their new identity any longer. Given that there was a significant generational gap between the older and younger participants in the study, this could be the result of several variables that are beyond the scope of this study. However, what can be inferred is that there was something that changed about the culture or society that allowed the younger participants to move more smoothly from stage 2 to stage 3.

Surveillance/Coming Out to Community. This stage would seem to be the culmination of transition for the participants, and at least one may not have fully achieved this status. Joe and Andrew seemed to have an easier time adjusting to their new identities, and therefore were out to the community at the time of this study. Essentially they seemed to have progressed through all four stages in a matter of only a few years. Conversely, Jessica was at this stage at the time of the study in that she was out at work and her work was based in the community, but it was only in the last few years that she was able to do this. Maddie seemed to be the outlier in this stage in that she has been living as a woman for a few years but had not come out to her community. Essentially, Maddie seemed to have moved away from her community and began living full-time as a woman in a new community, which is where she lived during the time of the study. Maddie mentioned she had plans to come out to her neighbors in the near future, but she had not come out to anyone in this new town except for myself and a few other transgender people in online communities.

Overall, the conceptual framework seems to be supported by the data. All the participants seemed to progress through the stages of this model at their own pace and in

their own ways, which supported the queer theory and social constructivism foundation of the model. This was important for counselors and other mental health professionals in terms of helping transgender clients through their identity development process. The process can be delicate in terms of when and how to come out, as well as to whom. Essentially the model shows that there is an invisible boundary where transgender people in a rural area move swiftly from private to public in their identity development process, so preparing the client for the news to spread quickly and how to handle the reactions of people would be beneficial to the client. Mental health professionals should be cautious in encouraging a transgender client in a rural area from coming out too quickly, which may result in negative consequences, and reinforce the concept that the client was the master of their own lives where they should come out when they feel they are ready, while simultaneously providing the safe holding environment of counseling.

Limitations of the Study

The limitations of the study are similar to those of other multiple case study designs, such as a small number of participants, the limitations of qualitative data in terms of generalization, and the limitations of data analysis (Stake, 2006; Yin, 2014). The large geographic area was cited in Chapter 1 as a limitation of this study, which proved to be true on many levels. The limitations specific to this study are discussed in the following section.

One limitation was difficulty in recruiting participants. Because of the large area the sample was drawn from, it was logistically impossible, and potentially socially problematic to use traditional recruiting methods of sending out flyers or putting ads in

news outlets. Ultimately, the decision to use a therapist community member and advertise on Facebook was to protect the identity of the participants and maintain confidentiality and safety of the participants. The limitation in this method of soliciting participants is that the participants that did become part of the study were likely more Internet savvy than the average person based on the fact they were Facebook users, and had found the specific transgender group on Facebook in which the posting was advertised. The results may have been skewed in the sense of Internet use among participants based on this fact as well.

Second, the complicated protocols and rural setting seemed to impede participant-observation data collection as Joe, Andrew, and Jessica all stated they “don’t do much” and they agreed to contact me if they were going to be doing something observable, which did not occur. Maddie was the only participant who did complete observation data. Safety may have also been a variable in a person’s willingness to participate because of the participant-observation aspect of the protocol.

Third, the rural nature of the area, and the size of the area, seemed to be an impediment to locating participants. There were three other MTF participants who responded to the Facebook ad and seemed interested in participating in the study; however, none of these potential participants were able to meet with me because of schedule conflicts and they eventually ceased contact.

Lastly, research protocol may have been too ambitious for the study participants to fully engage in, as evidenced by the lack of participation of most of the participants. Only one participant completed all phases of the study, while the others did not and

eventually discontinued contact with the researcher. All participants agreed at the onset to complete all phases, but this simply did not occur. Joe cited the lack of transportation as an impediment to participating as well.

In terms of trustworthiness, the present study maintained trustworthiness as described in Chapters 1, 3 and 4.

Recommendations

In Chapter 2 of the study, the limitations of transgender issues were discussed, particularly in rural areas based on the limited academic literature on this topic. Based on this, there are many areas that could be potential research topics in the future. One of the findings of this study is that there seems to be a difference between the experiences of older versus younger transgender individuals, which merits further study.

Although this study was thorough, there are many more aspects of identity development to explore in this population. A phenomenological or symbolic interaction study exploring the meaning behind transitioning, choices to transition, or the detailed experiences of coming out to important people versus the community could be studied. If enough participants could be found, a quantitative study aimed at discovering measureable differences in levels of identity development compared to urban transgender people would also add to the academic knowledge.

There would also be significant value in repeating this study in other rural areas, especially in other states or geographic regions of the United States, such as in the rural South, West, or New England areas. In addition, a potentially useful study may even be

expanded to other countries that are culturally diverse from the United States to compare the developmental stages of identity development in those cultures.

Furthermore, a worthwhile study would be to survey or interview mental health professionals in rural areas about their practice experiences in this population, or to evaluate the knowledge base of a region's mental health professionals to determine competency and need for further training. A study such as this could also explore the specific needs of the mental health professional community and shape training programs for practitioners in rural areas.

Lastly, there would be value in exploring other aspects of living in a community for transgender people, particularly in a rural area. Topics such as work, school, religion/spirituality, or other areas of human growth and development would be interesting to explore in this population and add to the academic literature. These future studies would also assist mental health professionals in working with this population to be more multiculturally competent in their practice.

Implications for Positive Social Change

The findings of this study provided the groundwork for positive social change in the area of transgender research in rural areas. This study added to the academic knowledge of transgender identity development experiences by providing a unique viewpoint that is virtually nonexistent in the literature. There is a dearth of information about transgender, or LGBTQ issues, related to living in rural areas in the academic discussion, and this study provides a voice to the issues transgender people in a rural area face.

There was also a benefit to the mental health profession as a whole in the information gleaned from this study. The nuances of transitioning to the opposite gender in a rural area are detailed and rich in description in this study, which will provide healthcare providers and others with valuable information for treating transgender people in rural settings. Carroll et al. (2002) described the lack of knowledge mental health professionals currently have regarding this population and this study informs the gap of knowledge found among mental health professionals by providing them with rich and detailed stories of the people who are living in rural areas and transitioning to the opposite gender.

Aside from the difficulties of transitioning as a transgender person, substance abuse and mental health issues are also present in this population (Bockting et al., 2006; Mizock & Fleming, 2011; Wolf & Dew, 2012) in many of the same ways that cisgender people do. Although none of the participants in this study revealed that they were diagnosed with either a substance abuse or mental health disorder; at least one of the participants (Jessica) stated she had seen a therapist and was working on issues along with her transition. Substance abuse and mental health professionals specifically may benefit from the results of this study in treating and working with transgender people in a rural area.

Lastly, this work benefits transgender people in rural areas, and overall, by providing a voice to their experiences for others to understand. Empathy is grounded in understanding and this study provides a unique perspective from the participants' lives and experiences living in a rural area. This work may impact other areas yet to be seen.

Conclusion

With this study I conveyed the unique experiences of transgender people living in a rural area through rich and detailed case study analysis. The methodology utilized in the study proved appropriate and fruitful in conducting the study. The story of rural transgender people is by no means complete at the conclusion of this study. As I discussed throughout the study, and particularly in the recommendations for further research, there are many aspects of rural transgender life that are yet to be explored, eventually even the possibility of a quantitative study may be possible with the further advances in technology. Clinicians would be well served by learning about this population and the unique experiences the participants faced in their journeys. The medical field would also benefit from recognizing the unique characteristics of working with this population.

Transgender issues are becoming more and more prominent in cultures across the world, and society is rapidly changing. It was during the writing of this dissertation that government agencies such as Medicare and Social Security have begun to recognize treatment for transgender people is medically necessary and have started offering benefits for this population. Transgender people are often in the media related to entertainment, politics, and other social outlets, which could be a sign that transgender people are becoming more visible, and these identities could spread into more rural areas that have not yet experienced a transgender person living in them.

In this study, the online environment proved to be somewhat of a lifeline for participants in shaping their identity and physical development. In a sense, the Internet

served to facilitate the participants' transformations by providing information and giving them a place to find others like themselves who are struggling with their identity. D'Augelli (1994) included becoming an offspring in one of the steps of his identity development theory, but people who live in rural areas will not have access to a community in order to become an offspring. The Internet may supplant the physical community described in D'Augelli's and others' identity development frameworks for transgender people living in a rural area.

The purpose of this study was to examine the identity development process of transgender people who live in a rural area. The results of the study support the hypothesis that transgender people in a rural area follow a stage-wise identity development process that is unique when compared to transgender people who transition in urban areas. The Internet proved to be the primary source of information for all participants, including developing a sense of belonging to a community, even if it was only an online community. The participants in this study have provided the world a glimpse into an experience that has not yet been documented in academic literature. Through them, the world will learn the unique balance they maintain to come out in an area that is both supportive and dangerous for them to express who their genuine selves. The benefit that results in conducting and presenting this research will improve mental health services for all transgender people and bring attention to a vulnerable and hidden population.

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Appendix A: Interview Protocol

This interview protocol will be utilized in the first face-to-face meeting with the participant to start the data gathering process. The iterative nature of qualitative research necessitates that these will not be the only questions asked during the interview; however, all of the questions below will be asked during the interview phase of gathering data with each participant. The questions are open-ended and aim to answer the issue and topical research questions in this study for rural transgender men and women.

1. When did you first feel different from other people around you?
2. What messages do you remember during childhood about how boys and girls acted and behaved?
3. When did you first realize your gender did not match your internal experience of who you are?
4. How did you cope with the discovery that you were transgender?
5. What messages do you remember hearing as a transgender person before you came out?
6. What were your experiences coming out in a rural area? How did you handle coming out?
7. To whom did you first come out? Who was second? Etc.
8. What role did the internet or literature (books, etc.) play in how you thought about being transgender?
9. What feelings did you have when you first discovered online or literary resources for transgender people?

10. How were you treated in the community after you came out?
11. How do you think your experience living in a rural area differs from a transgender person living in an urban area?

Notes and reflections will be recorded at memos in NVivo upon returning home. The audio file will be sent out for transcription via encrypted email, and when it is returned it will be uploaded to NVivo for cataloging and analysis.

Appendix B: Review of Physical Artifacts Protocol

The review of physical artifacts will be conducted at the second face-to-face meeting. The participant will be asked at the conclusion of the first meeting to identify 5-10 objects that represent their transition from one gender to the other. The objects could be photos, articles of clothing, personal care products, mementos, or anything that the person identifies as symbolic of their journey.

During the second meeting, which will be chosen at a location and time convenient for the participant, the researcher will ask the participant to display the artifact and tell the story behind it. The researcher will record notes in a notebook during the process. If permission is granted, the researcher will also take pictures of the artifacts when appropriate, but the photos will not be published as part of the data.

If the participant declines permission to take a photo of the artifact, the researcher will rely on a written description of the artifact. The descriptions and photos of the artifacts will be used in the data analysis phase to further develop the context and details of the case to provide a rich case history.

At the conclusion of the data gathering phase, the researcher will ask each participant to create a collage or creative project that symbolizes their journey in who they have become today that incorporates their transgender and rural identities. With the participant's permission, this "identity project" will be photographed and included in the write up of the results and included as part of the data in the study. The researcher will upload all data, including reflections and memos, to NVivo upon returning home.

Appendix C: Participant-Observations Protocol

During participant-observation, the researcher will focus on the participant and how they go about their day-to-day activities. The nature of living in a rural area will likely cause my presence to be too conspicuous for direct or indirect observations; however, participant-observations will allow the researcher to be present alongside the participant and will provide the researcher with a more emic perspective into the person's life. Should the participant come upon someone they know during the observation and the person asks about the researcher's presence, the participant will respond that the researcher is a friend visiting for the day, which is not uncommon in this rural area.

The researcher will ask to accompany each of the participants over 5-10 observations during normal daily activities they carry out, such as grocery shopping, socializing at a bar, etc. The venue will be specific to the participant and their lives, so they will be engaging in activities normal to their life. A list of potential observations will be compiled during the first two meetings of this process. The researcher will schedule the first of these observations at the conclusion of the physical artifact review meeting. Each subsequent observation meeting will be scheduled at the conclusion of the previous meeting.

The researcher will arrive at the designated time and location of each observation and wait for the participant to arrive. The researcher will then accompany the participant during their activity and ask minimal questions. The participant will be encouraged to provide brief narration during the activity, if appropriate, of how the activity is different after transitioning compared to before transitioning. Immediately following the

observation the researcher will use NVivo to record notes, impressions, and reflections upon returning home.

Appendix D: Researcher Biographical Sketch

In this study, I will self-disclose any researcher bias and provide a biographical sketch here. I identify as a gay man married to another gay man. I have been a transgender ally since 1998 while attending Michigan State University. I have also been a part of a statewide transgender organization, friends with the executive director of this organization for many years, and I have worked as a therapist providing professional counseling services to transgender people who live in rural areas.

I am also a native to the area in which the study will take place. This provides both a unique perspective having lived the experiences as a gay adolescent growing up in a rural area. This is also a potential weak area in which contextual clues may be overlooked because of the closeness of the researcher to the environment. I will address this through the use of a field note journal to reflect on experiences and take notes to later provide thick description.

I do not hold any negative biases toward transgender people and I have worked with many transgender people across the coming out process, and I personally enjoy working with transgender people. I also have several transgender friends and I am active in the transgender community in the area in which I live.

I will not utilize any previous personal or professional relationships with transgender people during the course of this study. I will recruit a gatekeeper into the transgender community through community therapists. There are no community organizations for the LGBT population in the area the study will take place, so therapists and social service workers are likely the only people who know a person's status and can

provide this connection. Once the gatekeeper is identified I will ask them to provide me with information to contact participants they know and ask them if the research may contact them.

Appendix E: Consent Form

CONSENT FORM

You are invited to take part in a research study of transgender identity development in people who live in a rural area. The multiple case study aims to provide rich and detailed information about the context and individual experiences of the participant's lives who identify as transgender and choose to live in a rural area. The researcher is inviting transgender adults over the age of 18 years and who live in a rural area in one of the 26 counties that make up northern Michigan to be in the study. This form is part of a process called "informed consent" to allow you to understand this study before deciding whether to take part.

This study is being conducted by a researcher named Nicholaus Erber, who is a doctoral student in the Counselor Education & Supervision program at Walden University.

Background Information:
The purpose of this study is to identify the process in which transgender people who live in a rural area form their identity and find information about transgender people while remaining in the area where they live. The intent for this study is to document the rich and detailed experiences and contexts of transgender people in rural areas to better understand the identity development process in transgender people in a rural area.

Procedures:
If you agree to be in this study, you will be asked to:

- Acknowledge your consent to participate in the study by signing this informed consent form
- Meet researcher at a location and time of your choosing for all of the meetings
- First, participate in a 60-90 minute digital audio recorded interview about your identity development process
- Second, participate in another 60-90 minute meeting in which we will review 5-10 physical artifacts of your choosing that symbolize your transition to a new identity
- Provide permission to photograph the physical artifacts (optional)
- Third, provide consent to engage in 5-10 direct and/or participant observations with the researcher (direct and/or participant observations are meetings that may last between 15-90 minutes in which I accompany you during normal day-to-day activities such as shopping, socializing at a bar or other venue, etc.)
- Complete an art project that tells the story of your transition through symbolism and visual media. The format, media, and details of the art project are completely up to your discretion, and a photograph of the project will be included in the final write up of the study.

Here are some sample questions:

1. When did you first feel different from what other people expected you to be?
2. When did you first realize your gender did not match?
3. What messages did you hear as a transgender person before you came out?
4. When did you come out?
5. What memories do you have about your environment and how it related to gender while you were growing up?

Voluntary Nature of the Study:
This study is voluntary. Everyone will respect your decision of whether or not you choose to be in the study. No one will treat you differently if you decide not to be in the study. If you decide to join the study now, you can still change your mind later. You may stop participation at any time.

Risks and Benefits of Being in the Study:
Being in this type of study involves some risk of the minor discomforts that can be encountered in daily life, such as stress, fatigue, or disruption of activities. Being in this study would not pose risk to your safety or wellbeing. Discussing your coming out experiences and transition could be potentially harmful to your psychological wellbeing. Because of this, the researcher will provide debriefing immediately following and at any time after the interview for all participants, and a list of qualified mental health professionals and other resources will be provided at your request. The researcher will not publish the interview in its entirety, nor will any identifying data be disclosed; however, small snippets of conversation may be used to highlight points and provide contextual background.

A benefit of participating in this study is being part of a larger social change movement of transgender people becoming more visible to health care workers and other researchers in the field. There is very little research on transgender people who live in rural areas and your experiences may contribute positively to other transgender people who live locally, or who live in other states or countries. Your contribution to this project will provide insights that health care workers, legislators, and others may benefit from in the form of new policies, laws, and practices.

Payment:
There is no monetary compensation for your participation in this project.

Privacy:
Any information you provide will be kept confidential in a locked box only accessible to the researcher. The researcher will not use your personal information for any purposes outside of this research project. Also, the researcher will not include your name or anything else that could identify you in the study reports. Data will be kept secure by locked box and computer passwords on any computers used in this study. Data will be

kept for a period of at least 5 years, as required by the university. As the researcher is a licensed counselor, and therefore a mandated reporter, confidentiality may be broken if duty to war or duty to protect issues come up. Three reasons fall into this category:

- If I know someone is a danger to themselves (suicidal);
- If I know someone is a danger to others (homicidal);
- Or if there is any suspected child abuse or neglect occurring.

In any of these situations, I am mandated to report the situation to the appropriate authorities.

Contacts and Questions:
You may ask any questions you have now. Or if you have questions later, you may contact the researcher via phone at xxx-xxx-xxxx or email at nicholaus.erber@waldenu.edu. If you want to talk privately about your rights as a participant, you can call Dr. Leilani Endicott. She is the Walden University representative who can discuss this with you. Her phone number is 612-312-1210. Walden University's approval number for this study is 03-25-14-0049519 and it expires on March 24, 2015.

The researcher will give you a copy of this form to keep.

Statement of Consent:

I have read the above information and I feel I understand the study well enough to make a decision about my involvement. By signing below, I understand that I am agreeing to the terms described above.

Printed Name of Participant ______________________________

Date of consent ______________________________

Participant's Signature ______________________________

Researcher's Signature ______________________________

Appendix F: Community Partner Letter of Agreement

Letter of Cooperation from a Community Research Partner

Community Research Partner Name:
Contact information:
Date:

Dear Nicholaus Erber,

Based on my review of your research proposal, I give permission for you to conduct the study entitled Transgender Identity Development in a Rural Area: A Multiple Case Study of Trans-Identified People within my organization. As part of this study, I authorize:

1. The key informant will provide the contact information of individuals they know that meet the criteria, then the researcher will make first contact with the participants. Alternatively, the key informant may choose to advertise the study on social media sites that the key informant has access to as a professional within an organization. In this option the participants will self-select to be part of the study.
2. Should the key informant choose to advertise on social media, the following text will be used: Announcement: A study about transgender identity development is being conducted in the 26 county area north of M-10 in Michigan. If you identify as transgender (either male-to-female or female-to-male), you are older than 18 years of age, and you live in the area described above, please contact Nick Erber at xxx-xxx-xxxx or by email at nicholaus.erber@waldenu.edu to participate in the study. Participation is completely voluntary and there is no financial compensation for participation.

We understand that our organization's responsibilities include: provide contact information (name and phone number) of potential participants, which the researcher will use to make first contact with the potential participants. We reserve the right to withdraw from the study at any time if our circumstances change.

I confirm that I am authorized to approve research in this setting.

I understand that the data collected will remain entirely confidential and may not be provided to anyone outside of the research team without permission from the Walden University IRB.

Sincerely,

Walden University policy on electronic signatures: An electronic signature is just as valid as a written signature as long as both parties have agreed to conduct the transaction electronically. Electronic signatures are regulated by the Uniform Electronic Transactions

Act. Electronic signatures are only valid when the signer is either (a) the sender of the email, or (b) copied on the email containing the signed document. Legally an "electronic signature" can be the person’s typed name, their email address, or any other identifying marker. Walden University staff verify any electronic signatures that do not originate from a password-protected source (i.e., an email address officially on file with Walden).

Appendix G: Resources and Referrals

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this research study. It would be completely normal for you to experience some mild anxiety and discomfort after participating in an interview of this kind. I am here primarily as a researcher, but I am also committed to not causing any harm to participants. Below is a list of books, websites, and referral information for you to access if you feel you need more support. You may also contact me directly at xxx-xxx-xxxx for more information or referrals not found on this form.

Websites
Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation (GLAAD) Transgender Resources at http://www.glaad.org/transgender. GLAAD is a national advocacy organization for LGBTQ issues and has a wealth of resources and contact information.

The Transgender Law Center at www.transgenderlawcenter.org is a national legal advocacy group that can answer legal questions about identity and transitioning.

Transgender Michigan at www.transgendermichigan.org or at 855-345-TGMI (8464) is a local Michigan transgender support organization that can holds a wealth of local Michigan information on transgender life. There is also a local chapter of Transgender Michigan in Traverse City.

The University of Michigan Comprehensive Gender Services Program at http://www.uofmhealth.org/medical-services/transgender-services provides comprehensive medical and psychological services to transgender people across Michigan and nationally.

*There are also countless Facebook pages, Twitter feeds, and online discussion boards that offer various kinds of support for transgender people. Doing an internet search for "transgender resources" will reveal these.

Books
Warrior Princess: A U.S. Navy Seal's Journey to Coming Out Transgender by Kristin Beck, Anne Speckhard, and William Shepherd. This is the story of a man who transitions to being a woman after serving in the US Navy as a Navy Seal.

Gender Outlaws: The Next Generation by Kate Bornstein and S. Bear Bergman. The first edition of *Gender Outlaws* was published over 15 years ago and this edition contains similar essays and stories from transgender people around the world.

Becoming a Visible Man by Jamison Green. This is an autobiographical account of a transgender person during his transition.

*Source: Amazon.com – doing a search for "transgender" in Amazon will reveal a large collection of fiction and nonfiction transgender stories.

Referrals

Because this study is conducted over a large geographic region, individual referrals will be made on a case-by-case basis in the participant's own geographic area. When a referral for counseling is not available in the local area, a referral outside the geographic area will be made. Transgender Michigan also has a referral list of transgender friendly therapists.

Appendix H: Post-Observation Debriefing Questions

At the conclusion of each direct or participant observation, the participant will be debriefed to process thoughts, feelings, and beliefs the participant noticed during the observation. A list of questions that may be asked includes:

- What sort of things would you be comfortable sharing that you were thinking about during this period of time?
- What were you feeling during this period of time?
- What sort of internal dialogue or beliefs did you notice coming up during this period of time?

Curriculum Vitae
January 2, 2015

Education

Ph.D. Counselor Education and Supervision, 2015
WALDEN UNIVERSITY

- Dissertation title: Transgender Identity Development in a Rural Area: A Multiple Case Study of Trans-Identified People
- Specialization in Consultation

M.A. Community Counseling, 2006
WESTERN MICHIGAN UNIVERSITY

- Graduate Certificate in Holistic Health Counseling

B.S. Psychology, 2001
MICHIGAN STATE UNIVERSITY

- Specialization in Interdisciplinary Health Studies

Professional Experience

THOMAS JUDD CARE CENTER, Munson Medical Center, Traverse City, MI
2013 – Present
Clinic Coordinator/HIV Counselor
Responsible for supervision of a medical case management team focused on treating people living with HIV/AIDS (PLWHA). Individual, group, and family counseling for people diagnosed with HIV. Handle all administrative supervision of program functions, including grant requirements and financial oversight.

LAKE SIDE COUNSELING, PLLC, Traverse City, MI
2011 – 2013
Owner/Counselor
Start up private practice counseling practice specializing in depression, anxiety, stress management, relationships, anger management, LGBTQ issues, addiction and recovery, and wellness. Specialized in providing gender counseling to transgender people seeking transition.
Maintain all business operations, including independent contractor counselors that operate under my business name. Provide limited licensed professional counselor (LLPC) supervision.

NORTH COUNTRY COMMUNITY MENTAL HEALTH, Rapid City, MI
2007 – 2013
Assertive Community Treatment (ACT) Team Leader
Supervise a multidisciplinary treatment team in clinical and administrative functions. Provide case management and counseling services to adults with serious, persistent mental illness and co-occurring disorders in individual and group format. Provide crisis

screening and hospitalization when needed. Provide limited licensed professional counselor (LLPC) supervision.

NORTH COUNTRY COMMUNITY MENTAL HEALTH, Gaylord, MI
2006 – 2007
Outpatient Therapist
Provide outpatient therapy to all age groups and all presenting problems to the Gaylord community in both individual and group format. Provide crisis screening and hospitalization when needed.

WOMEN'S RESOURCE CENTER, Traverse City, MI
2005 – 2010
Domestic Violence Group Facilitator
Co-facilitate domestic violence offenders group to men court-ordered to attend group because of domestic violence charges. Teach the Duluth model of Men Exploring Non-violent Solutions to group participants.

NORTH COUNTRY COMMUNITY MENTAL HEALTH, Rapid City, MI
2002 – 2006
Case Manager
Provide case management functions of linking, coordinating, monitoring, assessing, and advocating for adults with serious persistent mental illness. Utilize person-centered planning model of treatment planning to develop plans of service for adults with serious persistent mental illness.

Teaching Experience
Counseling Theories, Basic Counseling Skills, Group Work and Dynamics

State of Michigan Committees
Health Professions Recovery Committee – 2014-present
Clinical and Policy Subcommittee – 2014-present
Clinical Review Subcommittee – 2014-present

Licenses and Certificates
Licensed Professional Counselor (LPC), State of Michigan, 2007 – Present
Nationally Certified Counselor (NCC), National Board of Certified Counselors, 2008 – Present
Certified Advanced Alcohol and Drug Counselor (CAADC), Michigan Certification Board of Addiction Professionals, 2008 – Present
Approved Clinical Supervisor (ACS), Center for Credentialing and Education, 2012 – Present
Certified Clinical Mental Health Counselor (CCMHC), National Board of Certified Counselors, 2012 – Present

Evidence-Based Practice Training
Motivational Interviewing
Family Psychoeducation, Single- and Multi-Family Group models
Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy
Solution Focused Therapy
Co-Occurring Disorder Treatment (Integrated Dual-Diagnosis Treatment)
Assertive Community Treatment
Dialectical Behavior Therapy
Person-Centered Therapy

Professional Associations
Licensed Professional Counselors of Northern Michigan, President-Elect, 2012
Michigan Counseling Association, Treasurer, 2012 – Present
Member, 2010 – Present
Michigan Association for Counselor Education and Supervision, Member, 2013 – Present
American Counseling Association, Member, 2010 – Present
Association for Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, and Transgender Issues in Counseling, Member, 2010 – Present
Association for Counselor Education and Supervision, Member, 2012 – Present
University of Michigan Comprehensive Gender Services Program, Affiliate, 2012 – Present

Publications and Presentations
Erber, N. (2014). Outlining a crisis management plan for a community: Crisis planning in Michigan. Michigan Journal of Counseling; Research, Theory, and Practice, 40(3).

Erber, N. (2013, Jul 18). Quality of life and wellness in people living with HIV/AIDS (PLWHA). Munson Behavioral Health in-service. Traverse City, MI.

Capuzzi, D., Gladding, S., Lee, C., Stauffer, M., Erber, N., & Glowiak, M. (2013, Mar 21). Male counselors and male clients: Sharing counseling experiences. American Counseling Association 2013 Conference. Cincinnati, OH.

Erber, N. L. & Stahlbuck-Whittaker, A. (2012, Dec 7). Psychopharmacology for counselors. MCA/NBCC training, Gaylord, MI.

Erber, N. L., Schneider, D., Dey, S., & Winters, S. (2011). Care coordination: Root cause analysis gone right. Conference presentation at the annual Michigan Association of Community Mental Health Boards' Spring Conference, Lansing, Michigan.

Erber, N. L., Schneider, D., Dey, S., & Winters, S. (2011). Care coordination: Root cause analysis gone right. Conference presentation at the 11th Annual Substance Use Disorder Conference, Lansing, Michigan.

Erber, N. L. (2007). Caregiver fatigue: An introduction and strategies. Otsego Memorial Hospital, Gaylord, MI.

Erber, N. L. (2006). Coping with stress in the face of losing your job. Community presentation, Gaylord, Michigan.

Erber, N.L. (2005). Substance sbuse in the LGBTQ population: An overview of the literature. Conference session, Michigan Counseling Association conference, Traverse City, Michigan.

Erber, N. L. & Klepper, K. K. (2004). Attitudes of professional counselors toward gay and lesbian clients: A survey. Conference session, Michigan Counseling Association conference, Detroit, Michigan.

Erber, N. L., Almerigi, J. B., Carbary, T. J., & Harris, L. J. (2002). The contribution of postural bias to lateral preferences for holding human infants. Brain & Cognition, 48, 352–356.

Erber, N. L. (2001). The contribution of postural bias to lateral preferences for holding human infants. Poster session, 12th annual Theoretical and Experimental Neuropsychology meeting, Montreal, Quebec, Canada.