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Walden University

College of Social and Behavioral Health

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Ashley Rosenberg

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Walden University
2023

Abstract

Gender Transitioning in Childhood: A Hermeneutic Study of Parental Reactions

by

Ashley Rosenberg

MS, Walden University, 2019

BA, Walsh University, 2013

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Counselor Education & Supervision

Walden University

August 2023

Abstract

The visibility of the transgender community has grown in recent years. The purpose of the hermeneutic phenomenological study was to understand and provide context to the experiences of parents whose children have transitioned from their assigned birth sex to their authentic gender identity. The theoretical framework used was Kubler Ross' "Five Stages of Grief." Participants were interviewed by using semi structured interviews on Zoom. A total of 6 people participated in my study. Common themes emerged as a result of my study, which parallel previous research studies. These themes included shock and denial, a sense of grief and loss, feelings of helplessness, acceptance, fear, internal conflict, and feelings of failure. Understanding the common themes, they relate to parents of transgender children is crucial for counselors who work with these families. When parents learn that their child is transgender, they may experience a wide range of emotions, including shock, denial, anger, guilt, sadness, and eventually acceptance. By understanding these challenges, counselors can anticipate the specific needs of parents at each stage and provide appropriate guidance and support. By validating emotions, facilitating emotional expression, anticipating challenges, empowering decision-making, and promoting acceptance, counselors can help parents navigate the complexities of their grief and develop a positive and supportive relationship with their transgender child.

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Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

Background of the Study

The visibility of the transgender community has grown in recent years. This increased visibility necessitates that a higher number of professional counselors become competent in meeting the needs of transgender children and their families. This includes not only understanding how to service transgender children, but the family and loved ones of this individual as well. Counselors can offer support by helping parents find meaning in the transition. Parents who understand their own personal experience and the needs of their child can better guide and support their child. It is necessary that the counseling field is made aware of my research because the transgender community is continuing to grow in visibility, and the existing research demonstrates that the stigma this community faces is damaging to their wellbeing.

Grief is universal because of the varied factors and conditions which can cause it. The goal of my study was to explore the experiences of parents who have a transgender child. The five stages of grief model was used in order to accomplish this goal. This is a well-researched model based on stages of denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance (Kubler Ross, 1970). This model was chosen because grief is a part of the general human experience. Use of this model allowed me to analyze the experiences of the parents of transitioning children, and to assess if their experience is similar to those of parents who have experienced the death of a child. I used semi structured interviews to gather data for the purpose of this study.

This chapter notes the divide which exists in the literature concerning the needs of parents of transgender children and the counselors who work with this growing community. This chapter will also highlight the problems transgender children face, including the damaging stigma societal norms impose on this population. The important role parents play in the life of their child's development is emphasized. The difference in the quality of life experienced by transgender children who have parental support is compared to those who are deprived of this support. Terms such as *culture* and *grief* are defined, and the basis of such definitions are then given.

The problem statement is then expanded on, explaining why the field needs this research. The purpose of this qualitative hermeneutic phenomenological study is explained, which is to comprehend and offer perspective regarding the experience of parents who have a transgender child. The goal of this study is expounded on as I explore the experiences of parents whose children have transitioned from their biological sex to their identified gender. The role of the five stages of grief model and its implementation is outlined. The qualitative and phenomenological foundation of the theoretical framework is then explained, and the influence of the grief literature is demonstrated as the conceptual framework. This is followed by potential implications for social change for transgender individuals, their loved ones, and the wider society.

Problem Statement

Numerous challenges and stigmas are faced by transgender children. These challenges come not only from society, but also from their families and friends. Due to the immensity of the problems encountered, transgender children benefit when they

receive support from their parents. Parents who are both willing to aid their child and equipped to do so play an important role in the facilitation of their child's journey (Hillier & Torg, 2019).

The visibility of the transgender community has grown in recent years (Miller, 2020). This increased visibility necessitates that a higher number of professional counselors become competent in meeting the needs of transgender and gender non-conforming children and their families. This includes not only understanding how to meet the needs of a transgender child, but the family and loved ones of the child as well (Wahlig, 2015). According to James et al. (2016), 77% of transitioning and transitioned individuals wanted therapy to talk about gender issues, but only 58% had actually received this opportunity. Counselors must consider that many families with a transgender child may live in a geographic area that lacks basic services for transitioning children and their families (Tishelman et al., 2015). Counselors should also be familiar with accounts where families encounter religious institutions and schools where dealings with transgender children can vary in acceptance and effectiveness. Numerous everyday activities have an impact on transgender children, and counselors must be ready to help families face these issues. Examples of these issues include groups such as youth sports teams and interests like dance, theater, and camping. In cases regarding transgender children, counselors must take into consideration the important role parents play in the development of a child. Parents assist the growth of a child and prepare them for adult life in the wider community. Parents of transgender children need proper support, resources, and understanding regarding the needs of their transgender child. Without this

professional support, the parent/child relationship can be damaged and the child's development into adulthood can be hindered or even harmed (Miller, 2020).

Counselors can offer support by helping parents find meaning in their child's transition (Wahlig, 2015). Parents who understand their own personal experience and the needs of their child can better guide and support their child. It is necessary that the counseling field is made aware of this research because the transgender community is continuing to grow in visibility (Miller, 2020), and the existing research demonstrates that the stigma this community faces is damaging to their wellbeing (Magalhães et al., 2020). Parents who are equipped to help and support their child's transition play an important role in the journey of the transitioning child (Hillier & Torg, 2019), but many transgender children do not have appropriate parental support. Children who do not have appropriate parental support may participate in self-destructive behaviors and have a higher risk of suicide (Magalhães et al., 2020). Current studies also demonstrate that proper parental support results in an easier transitioning experience for the child and a more promising future (Magalhães et al., 2020).

This research study will illuminate the experiences and challenges parents face when they have a transgender child. From this research, counselors can better understand what skills and resources parents need in order to appropriately support their child. From this understanding, counselors can also begin to initiate the necessary social change regarding this issue. Counselors may be uninformed of the external factors that influence transgender children and their parents. Gender transitions can have an impact on numerous everyday activities and counselors must be ready to help families face these

issues. In order for parents to receive the skills necessary to be supportive of their children, counselors must be made aware of the challenges they face.

Purpose of Study

The purpose of the hermeneutic, phenomenological study was to understand and provide context to the experiences of parents who have a transgender child. By interviewing parents of transgender children, I explored the ways in which parents of transgender children experience their child's transition. As a result of this study, counselors may have a better understanding of a parents' experience regarding the transition of their child. Increased knowledge in this area may help counselors to be better equipped to support children and their families. This is necessary because transgender identities are still widely misunderstood in society, even by some professionals, though increased attention for this community has been seeing an increase in clinical competence.

Research Question

How do parents of transgender children experience their child's gender transition?

Theoretical Framework

In this study, I used phenomenology as my theoretical framework. Comprehension of the unique lived experiences of others can be achieved via the qualitative research process. This method is not intended to explain experiences but instead aims to convey understanding regarding the experience (Fischer, 2006). Qualitative research also exists as a platform from which individuals can find and express the meaning of their own experiences. Qualitative research commonly analyzes

phenomenology alongside hermeneutics, which itself relates the interpretation of text to the actual theory implemented with the intent of finding understanding (Rennie, 2007).

A theologian turned student of philosophy named Heidegger is the founder of hermeneutic or interpretive phenomenology (Neubauer, Witkop, & Varpio, 2019). Heidegger's style and philosophical examination was originally quite reflective of Husserl's work, but this orientation changed once he began to disagree with the tenants of transcendental phenomenology. Heidegger's focus on the nature of being is what separated his thought process from Husserl's interest in the nature of knowledge itself. This dichotomy of Heidegger's ontological focus vs Husserl's epistemological focus was crucial in the rise of hermeneutic phenomenology (Neubauer, Witkop, & Varpio, 2019).

Heidegger viewed human beings as actors in the world. This contrasts with Husserl's perspective of human beings as knowers of phenomenon. Being actors, the relationship between human beings and the reality in which they exist motivated the work of Heidegger. The designation *lifeworld* arose from Heidegger's perspective on humans as actors and recognizes how the world in which humans live molds them. These actors may not be explicitly conscious of their self-understanding, but they do have a certain grasp of the place in the world in which they live (Neubauer, Witkop, & Varpio, 2019).

According to Heidegger, an individual's personal history and lived reality is so influential that it cannot be detached from the conscious experience. The consciousness of the human person is so rooted in one's history and culture that even new encounters are understood through the lens of previous experience. The individual's lifeworld is a series of layers which will always be a referent from which new knowledge will be

experienced. Heidegger's hermeneutic phenomenology intends to understand the individual beyond surface level awareness. This is accomplished by investigating the narratives that individuals create in order to navigate their own history and lived experience (Neubauer, Witkop, & Varpio, 2019).

Hermeneutic phenomenology goes beyond labeling surface awareness. Instead, it is founded upon the experiences which are interpreted through the lifeworld of the individual (Neubauer, Witkop, & Varpio, 2019). Context and text can be graphically demonstrated via a hermeneutic circle. Researchers can project themselves within this circle for the purpose of better comprehending this dynamic (Walsh, 2012). Hermeneutics exists as an interpretive method used in qualitative research for exploring lived experiences. My research study involved interviewing the parents of transgender children. I expected parents of transgender children to have varying experiences regarding grief and loss.

Conceptual Framework

For a conceptual framework in this study, I used grief and the five stages of grief based on Kubler-Ross and Kessler (2005). One way to understand grief is by viewing it as an experience of loss, which itself can take on numerous appearances (Moules et al., 2007). Loss can be circumstantial or concrete, as it can involve incidentals such as a loss of youth and self, or even concrete situations such as death. Moules recognizes that loss can have cognitive, emotional, social, spiritual, and even structural facets. He also notes that the experience of significant loss can result in a lifelong relationship with that experience which fluctuates and develops over time (Moules et al., 2007).

Attig (2011) views grief through the lens of an individual's scope of coping skills rendered over time in the face of significant loss. These responses can be unique to the individual or may involve partaking in mourning practices which have a precedent in societal norms. Keeping (2014) viewed and defined grieving differently from Attig. As opposed to simply being a series of responses in the face of loss, Keeping saw the readjustment process as a part of grieving. Thus, Keeping saw reorientation and reentering society as a part of the grieving progression.

Grief literature is not universal in how the experience is described. While most view grief as a universal experience which is to be expected, there are those who are opposed to this notion. The five stages of grief as described in the works of Kubler-Ross and Kessler (2005) have grown in prominence amongst researchers. The stages identified in this process include denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. The questions I asked during the interview process were open-ended in nature. I focused on the participants' definitions of the phenomena and the sense of meaning they have formed. Leaving the questions open-ended also allowed me to meet the participants as individuals, taking their unique experiences into account.

According to Coor and Coor (2020), Kübler-Ross' work with the terminally ill was the foundation for her book entitled *On Death and Dying*, which is where she first discusses her model on the five stages of grief (Kübler-Ross, 1993). Kübler-Ross does not generalize these stages and admits that not every individual will experience every stage. Some individuals may even reexperience a stage (Kübler-Ross, 1993). In spite of

the variations of experience, Kübler-Ross' believed that these five stages are the most commonly found stages amongst those who grieve.

My study is focused on whether parents of transgender children experience a pattern of grief and loss similar to the five stages of grief when their child is transgender. The five stages of grief are not linear and are experienced differently by individuals (Coor & Coor, 2020). Individuals may undergo less stages, while others have revisited stages. Transition is a trying experience, and this can easily trigger the stages of grief (Field & Mattson, 2016). According to Field and Mattson (2016), parents of transgender children are also influenced by the transition of their child and can experience loss regarding their own identity. A lack of resources regarding this experience, accompanied by society's largely anti-trans opinion, may leave parents of transgender children feeling lost and powerless (Field & Mattson, 2016). Reports show that parents may blame themselves for what is happening in their families, which is reflective of responses given by parents of children from the lesbian, gay, and bisexual communities (Field & Mattson, 2016).

Hermeneutics is a concept which claims that there exist several factors which influence the perspectives and viewpoints that individuals have. These factors create a type of *lens* through which we see and interpret the world around us. The five stages of grief (Kubler-Ross) model was the lens that I used for this study. The gender transition process is not a process which can be generalized due to the personal level to which individuals experience their gender. Individuals undergoing the transitioning process experience various emotions which are deeply personal. These emotions are experienced

not only by the individual undergoing the transition but may also be experienced by their parents (Kubler-Ross, 1993). It is important to note that personal experiences do not negate the reality of commonalities which exist among the experiences of transgender children and their parents. Commonly reported experiences include feelings of grief and loss (Kubler-Ross,1993).

Nature of the Study

The nature of this study is qualitative and phenomenological. Data for this hermeneutic phenomenological study were gathered by interviewing parents of transgender children. I examined the views of parents who had a transgender child as I attempted to shed light on the essence of this parental experience (see Neubauer et al., 2019). I received permission from the LGBT Community Center in Cleveland, Ohio to post recruitment flyers for this study. I was also approved to post this study on Walden University's participant pool website. I needed between six and twelve participants to reach saturation (Groenewald, 2018).

I used a qualitative approach because this approach allowed me to delve deep into the complexities of my participants' experiences, perceptions, and behaviors. Unlike quantitative methods that focus on numerical data, qualitative research seeks to capture rich, nuanced insights, making it suitable for exploring subjective phenomena that can't be fully captured through numbers alone. I implemented semi structured interviews as my method for gathering information (Jamshed, 2014). Utilizing semi structured interviews allowed for flexibility and for the participants to be able to guide my line of questioning (Jamshed, 2014; Ravitch & Carl, 2016). The goal of my inquiry was to better understand

the experience of parents who have a transgender child. These individual interviews were conducted through the use of Zoom videoconferencing. Recordings were then transcribed word for word. Participants were given the option to engage in follow-up interviews to fill in missing information from their initial interviews.

Definitions

Acceptance Stage: Acceptance is the last stage of grief as described by the process presented by Kübler-Ross, and it is a recognition that life continues after loss and that the one who experienced loss will survive it. This does not mean that the loss itself is fine, but that the individual recognizes the ability to move on in spite of the loss. Emotions stabilize as the individual comes to healthy terms with the new reality (Kubler Ross 1970).

Anger Stage: Anger is commonly felt once the unreality of denial passes. Those who experience anger often feel targeted by the unfairness of life. During this stage the individual finds others to blame for their grief. Even friends and family can become the targets of this anger (Kubler Ross, 1970).

Bargaining Stage: Individuals strive to escape their grief via negotiations when in the bargaining stage. Individuals in this state are willing to make major life alterations, hoping to return to the normalcy which existed before the grief. Along with negotiations, guilt is another common emotion during the bargaining stage (Kubler Ross, 1970).

Dasein: Dasein is a term in the German language which is most commonly interpreted as “existence” in English translations of the word. Labels such as “presence” are often designated when explaining the experience that “*Dasein*” intends to convey.

The existential philosophy of Martin Heidegger relies heavily on the concept of *Dasein* as a fundamental element unique to the human experience (Haugeland & Rouse, 2013).

Denial Stage: Loss can make individuals feel overwhelmed as life seems to lose meaning. The denial stage offers an escape for the individual which allows for the loss to be lived through in these initial stages (Kubler Ross, 1970).

Depression Stage: Depression is the emotion most commonly associated with grief. It is the recognition of loss which leads to depression, and depression itself is a feeling of emptiness as a result of the loss. The worldview of the individual is often one in which circumstances seem overwhelming because of the loss. Depression is often recognized through symptoms such as emotional numbness, seeming bewildered, or withdrawing from normal activities and routines (Kubler Ross, 1970).

Hermeneutic Circle: The Hermeneutic Circle recognizes that the "whole" and its "parts" exist in a relationship that is dialogical in nature. Thus, the whole cannot be understood separately from its parts and vice versa. This relationship establishes a comprehensive path as the parts are viewed via the lens of the whole and the whole cannot be understood without its parts. Theory and data are not isolated from one another in this hermeneutic, but instead are interpreted in relation to one another. It is in this since that the circular interpretation warned about by the ancient Greek philosopher Heraclitus can be avoided, and a relationship akin to one between text and context can be embraced (Neupokoeva & Chapaev, 2021).

Transgender: An individual whose personal gender identity does not always align with the sex that they were assigned at birth.

Transgender identity: The self-awareness which allows one to make such a distinction between the assigned sex and the actual gender identity is known as a transgender identity. Transgender identity does not always result in identifying as male or female but may result in an identity which is encompassed by neither term (DSM V, American Psychiatric Association 2013:527–528).

Queer: This word can be used to describe those who deviate from sexual norms. It is also a term adopted by those who have been marginalized by society for not adhering to said norms (Giffney, 2004).

Assumptions

In this study, I made several assumptions. Existing predispositions and possible prejudices regarding the research topic are discussed and discerned in hermeneutic phenomenological research. This type of research approaches biases as a factor which cannot be ignored by the researcher. As such, I managed my biases by first recognizing that they existed. Once recognized, my biases could be revised in accordance with the new data which was encountered during the research. My primary assumption was that parents of transgender children experience a sense of loss when their child is transgender. I used Kubler'Ross' five stages of grief model to conceptualize this sense of loss, which I believed would be experienced by parents at varying degrees and stages. This assumption was necessary because it was the basis of my study.

Scope and Delimitations

Delimitations are a study's boundaries which are set by the researcher, while limitations are influences that rest outside of the control of the researcher. The

delimitations of my research involve the participants chosen for my study, as its concentration is on biological or adoptive parents of transgender children. Participants in this study must be at least 18 years of age.

Limitations

My study had limitations. These included time limitations as well as the small sample size used in this study. A sample size that is too small may prevent the research findings from being generalized. Time constraints also presented a problem as I did not have unlimited time to gather data or recruit participants. A great deal of time must be dedicated to qualitative research as it is an intensive process that includes compiling various kinds of data from participants. These data are complex in that it may take the form of experiences, opinions, and points of view. The descriptive nature of the qualitative research process does not lend itself to plotting points on a chart, but instead involves a comprehensive undertaking of filtering through participant responses in order to discern the reason behind each participant's reply.

Potential Transferability

Transferability is also a feature of qualitative research to address with respect to this study. It is possible that other populations with comparable experiences will have insights akin to the ones shared by the parents of transgender children that were sampled for this study. Comparisons may abound as the transgender community becomes ever more visible in society (Miller, 2020). This likelihood underscores the necessity that this research be relayed to the field. This is important as the transgender community faces systemic injustices (Magalhães et al., 2020). Adding clarity to the existing research

would hopefully bolster the field's efforts to stand against the harmful societal stigma which marginalizes the transgender community.

Research demonstrates the necessary role that properly equipped parents play in the lives of their transgender children (e.g., Amy Hillier & Elisabeth Torg, 2019), and the results of this study may be applicable to other types of support systems for transgender children. Children who do not have appropriate parental support will often take part in behaviors which are self-destructive. This involves having a higher suicide-risk than their non-transgender peers (Magalhães et al., 2020). It should be noted that proper parental support has been shown to reduce these risks (Magalhães et al., 2020).

Significance and Implications for Social Change

This study has potential implications for the population under study and for social change. Transgender individuals experience numerous health challenges compared to the general population. These health challenges include anxiety, depression, minority stress, and suicidality. Such health problems become exasperated when transgender individuals do not have social support or access to treatment. These health issues can be lessened by gender transition, but gender transition does not protect this population from discrimination. Historical bias concerning the transgender population has hindered transgender outcomes in research. Thus, more research is necessary to address the needs of this population (Cornell University, 2020).

Parents face numerous challenges raising their children to be healthy, successful, and responsible adults. This study will help to bring awareness to these issues and also help parents to understand ways in which they can support their children. Gender identity

is crucial to how individuals see themselves and interact with others, and these perspectives are highly influenced by societal norms. The pressures of societal norms can have an impact on transgender and gender non-conforming children. Familial support can serve as a buffer against society's bias. Family acceptance and support is a predictor of greater health and self-esteem for gender non-conforming children. Research has also shown that this support lowers the challenges of anxiety, depression, stress, and suicidality (Magalhães et al., 2020).

Summary

The transition process for transgender children is a difficult undertaking that requires the affirmation of their gender identities through the acceptance, care, and understanding of loved ones. Parents of transgender children may be ill equipped for offering such support, as studies demonstrate that they may be experiencing their own challenges and emotions such as grief, akin to the loss of a child. As more families encounter this situation, it is necessary that professionals be equipped to empower parents and help them understand their experiences so that they in turn can support their child. It was the intent of this study to determine if the five stages of grief model could be applied to this phenomenon. Chapter 2 will entail a review of the literature. The significance of family support during times of change is highlighted, while core concepts like ambiguous loss and the process of finding meaning are presented and clarified. The examination of the five stages of grief is undertaken, elucidating how these stages can be employed in relation to this subject. Following that, overarching patterns are pinpointed and brought to light.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

This chapter will address the necessity of having competent professionals who can service not only transgender children, but also their families. Understanding how loss can be experienced within the context of a child's transition will also be discussed along with the literature search strategy. The importance of familial support during transition is emphasized and central ideas such as ambiguous loss and meaning making are introduced and defined. The five stages of grief are reviewed, and it is explained how these stages can be applied to this topic. Unifying themes are then identified.

The purpose of this hermeneutic phenomenological study was to understand and provide context to the experiences of parents whose children have a transgender child. By interviewing parents of transgender children, I explored the ways in which parents of transgender children experience their child's transition. As a result of this study, counselors may have a better understanding of the parents' experiences regarding the transition of their child. Increased knowledge in this area will help counselors better support parents of transgender children. This is necessary because transgender identities are still widely misunderstood in society, even by some professionals, though increased attention for this community has been seeing an increase in clinical competence. The question, "How do parents of transgender children experience their child's gender transition?" was the focus of my study.

Literature Search Strategy

I explored numerous databases when I conducted my review of the literature. I made use of Walden's University Library when searching databases. I utilized the

following electronic databases: Walden University Library, Google Scholar, LGBTQ+ Source, Project Muse, PsycARTICLES, SAGE Journals, ScienceDirect, SocINDEX with Full Text, PsycINFO, and CINAHL & MEDLINE Combined Search. The keywords I searched were *gender transition, gender, transgender identity, parents, transgender children, LGBTQ+, gender nonconforming,* and *grief.*

The first strategy I implemented was to concentrate on certain applicable key words other researchers have identified when I searched for articles related to my topic. For example, Wahlig's (2015) article focuses on a topic like my own, thus I adopted several of the key words in my own search. I was able to find several articles related to my dissertation topic by doing this. Second, I tried to focus my search on recent articles which have been published within the past 5 years. This strategic approach allowed my research to remain current and assisted me in avoiding outdated data. It is important to note that finding a plethora of articles related to my topic which have been published within the last five years presented a challenge. According to Marshall et al. (2019), an insufficient amount of data exists concerning how researchers have represented gender diverse individuals, such as transgender and gender non-conforming persons.

Theoretical Framework

Hermeneutic phenomenology is the theoretical framework for this study. This approach was coined by Heidegger (1919), is concerned with the life world or human experience as it is lived. The focus is toward illuminating details and seemingly trivial aspects within experience that may be taken for granted in our lives, with a goal of creating meaning and achieving a sense of understanding (Laverty, 2003). Heidegger's

style and philosophical examination was originally quite reflective of Husserl's work, but this orientation changed once he began to disagree with the tenants of transcendental phenomenology. Heidegger's focus on the nature of being is what separated his thought process from Husserl's interest in the nature of knowledge itself. This dichotomy of Heidegger's ontological focus vs Husserl's epistemological focus was crucial in the rise of hermeneutic phenomenology (Neubauer, Witkop, & Varpio, 2019).

Heidegger focused on *Dasein*, that is translated as the mode of being human or the situated meaning of a human in the world. Heidegger viewed humans as being primarily concerned creatures with an emphasis on their fate in an alien world (Laverty, 2003). Phenomenology becomes hermeneutical when its method is taken to be interpretive rather than purely descriptive. Heidegger argues that all forms of human awareness are interpretive.

The Hermeneutic Circle recognizes that the *whole* and its *parts* exist in a relationship that is dialogical in nature. Thus, the whole cannot be understood separately from its parts and vice versa. This relationship establishes a comprehensive path as the parts are viewed via the lens of the whole and the whole cannot be understood without its parts. Theory and data are not isolated from one another in this hermeneutic, but instead are interpreted in relation to one another. It is in this since that the circular interpretation warned about by the ancient Greek philosopher Heraclitus can be avoided, and a relationship akin to one between text and context can be embraced (Neupokoeva & Chapaev, 2021).

Interpretation is seen as critical to the process of understanding. Claiming that to be human was to interpret, Heidegger stressed that every encounter involves an interpretation influenced by an individual's background (Laverty, 2003). I view hermeneutics as an interpretive process that seeks to bring understanding and disclosure of the phenomena that parents of transgender children experience. This interpretive process is achieved through a hermeneutic circle which moves from the parts of experience to the whole of experience and back and forth again and again to increase the depth of engagement.

Conceptual Framework: The Five Stages of Grief and Loss

Gender identity is a lived reality which is experienced at a personal level, making it erroneous to treat the gender transition procedure as a generalizable process. Elements of the transitioning process are personal to the individuals experiencing it, resulting in various emotions experienced by both the transitioning child and their parents. Though a unique experience, there exist some commonalities often reported among transgender children and their families, including feelings of loss and grief. Through her 1969 book entitled "On Death and Dying," Swiss psychiatrist Elizabeth Kubler-Ross introduced her five stages of grief model (Kubler-Ross,1993). This model was rooted in her work with terminally ill patients. According to Kubler-Ross, the five stages begin with denial and isolation. This is soon followed by anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance (Kubler-Ross, 1993). This list should not be misleading however, as the stages are not linear. It is also important to note that not all individuals experience each stage. My observations have seen individuals undergo anywhere from one stage to all five. My

experiences in these observations have also shown that terminal illnesses are not the only triggers for grief and loss. One would suspect that ambiguous loss would also relate to the five stages of grief. In relation to this paper, a child's gender transition can also bring about these feelings.

Denial and Isolation

Denial is a common response from parents at the revelation of their child's authentic gender identity. This sense of *denial* is a safeguard that helps to cushion the parent from immediate shock (Corr, 2020). *Denial* can last for months or even years. Though it serves as a buffer when facing reality, *denial* can have numerous negative results as numbed emotions can lead to feelings of isolation for the parents.

Anger

Anger can result as parents come face-to-face with the reality that they are denying. Emotions such as inadequacy and shame can spring from the experienced *anger* (Corr, 2020). This *anger* may be aimed at others, such as other family members or even society at large. The parents themselves may be the target of their own *anger* as they may question their parenting techniques thinking that they "caused" their child to transition or question their gender identity.

Bargaining

A sense of helplessness can result from anger as the parents begin to imagine "if only" scenarios that they believe would have changed their current situation (Corr, 2020). These scenarios are followed by "if only" statements ("if only I had gotten my child help sooner") as parents try to bargain their way to the reality they want to experience. "If

only" statements may lead parents to self-blame during the bargaining stage and feel guilty as they believe they are responsible for their child's inability to identify with the sex they were assigned at birth.

Depression

The inability of *bargaining* to change their current situation can easily lead parents to feelings of *depression* (Corr, 2020). A child's transition means that gender-related hopes, goals, and dreams the parent once had may not be fulfilled. These potential losses may result in worry and sadness. The level to which *depression* is experienced depends on the individual.

Acceptance

Acceptance may be a challenging stage for some parents to reach. At this stage, parents of transgender children may come to accept their child's gender identity and be at peace with it. *Acceptance* does not equate to automatic happiness, but experiences of inner resolution have been commonly reported (Corr, 2020). At this stage, parents can better support their children.

Influence of Gender Norms on Identity

Gender norms are influenced by culture. Self-identity in United States culture is one which is highly influenced by the gender norms and sexual morays which accompany the sex individuals were assigned at birth (Wahlig, 2015). This greatly influences how individuals see themselves in relation to family, friends, and society. This also influences goals and hopes both short-term and long-term. The family unit itself is highly influenced by these gender norms and expectations, and in fact is a place in which these morals are

taught, nurtured, and fostered. Roles in the family such as mother, father, daughter, and son are all gender specific. Mothers and fathers relate in different ways to sons and daughters and have hopes for their children based on the role in which the child was born into (Wahlig, 2015).

How parents and children relate is key to understanding and supporting the child's identity. The revelation of a child's gender non-conformity can cause upheaval in how parents relate to their children and understand them, altering relationships (Wahlig, 2015). Parents may feel a sense of loss as hopes they had for their child no longer align with the child's authentic identity, and as the child's physical appearance changes. The child's new role in the family alters relations on multiple levels, and parents may be uncertain of how to support their child or even deal with their own emotional responses.

Parents' responses to their child's gender transition and the experiences they had regarding the transition are discussed in Wahlig's (2015) article. It is proposed that the challenge parents face resulting from a child's transition can be identified as ambiguous loss (Wahlig, 2015). A sense of loss is the context in which these experiences are understood, and the concept of dual ambiguous loss is introduced (Wahlig, 2015).

Societal and Familial Influences

The impact of culture on how an individual's assigned gender affects the individual's expectations, life goals, relationships, and roles is a key point for Wahlig (2015). This influence originates for the individual in the family unit, where expectations and roles are applied with assigned gender-centric designations such as father, mother, son, and daughter. The incredible impact culture has on gender is evident in these familial

relationships and dynamics, making it reasonable to understand that the revelation of a transgender child's authentic identity will drastically alter this unit's dynamic. Parental hopes, dreams, and expectations for their children, as well as how they relate to individual children, is gender centric (Wahlig, 2015). A child's gender transition initiates changes and endings which lead to loss and confusion for parents, resulting in grief (Testoni & Pinducciu, 2019). Wahlig's focus on the sense of confusion parents undergo when encountered by the authentic gender identity of their child is demonstrated as being a response to the change in a family dynamic which previously was dictated by adherence to society's-imposed gender roles.

Transgender individuals in the role of parenthood are examined in Faccio et al.'s (2013) study. This exploration is then compared to common assumptions regarding parenthood and transgender individuals. This study implemented the use of interviews which were semi structured in nature. Participants in these interviews included fourteen men and fourteen transgender women. Thematic areas were explored, including male and female stereotypes in parenting, as well as stereotypes and misconceptions of transgender parents. Self-representation was also explored regarding the role of parents. The impact of society's misrepresentation of transgender identities and parenthood was evident in the results. It was clear that how individuals represented themselves was highly influenced by these stereotypical distortions. Faccio et al.'s (2013) study suggests that transgender parenting involves a greater degree of changes due to a lack of historic and conventional precedent regarding this experience. Similar to other research, Faccio's study notes that this population and their challenges have been historically ignored by the professional

community. My research will add more information regarding this topic so that the needs of this population can receive more attention. Faccio's study influences my own research by again confirming the influence of society's distorted view of transgender identities, as well as its limited and restricting perceptions of gender identity.

Emotional Experiences of Parents

Research regarding the emotional experiences of the parents of transgender children is limited (Coolhart et al., 2018). The revelation that a child does not identify with their biological sex is accompanied by unexpected challenges, and the transition process can influence family members. Differing models of emotional processing within the family unit exist in the current literature, but they are not based on research. Instead, these models are derived from clinical experience with transgendered individuals and their families. Each model includes loss as an emotional experience each family must contend with.

A common theme across participant narratives in the existing literature is the concern had for the happiness and well-being of their children (Coolhart et al, 2018). Making the well-being of the child a priority helped parents to overcome the ambiguous loss they are felt as a result of their child's gender transition. This allowed for parents to provide support to the child while also finding strength throughout the experience (Coolhart et al, 2018; Wahlig, 2015).

Parents of transgender children face additional parenting challenges when compared to the experiences of parents of gay, lesbian, and bisexual children (Field & Mattson, 2016). Challenges reported by this group include the physical changes that

happen to the child during the transition as well as the tensions experienced in public during the transition process. Other difficulties stem from a lack of positive representation of transgender people in the popular media. Parents of transgender children also experienced a change in their own identity as their child transitioned. Anti-trans sentiment in society has led parents to feel isolated, and a lack of resources has heightened the difficulties these families face. Though there were definite differences, these parents reported some similarities to the experiences of parents of gay, lesbian, and bisexual children. These similarities include fears of bad parenting and experiences of mourning and grief (Field & Mattson, 2016).

Greif is a complex process. Grief results when something or someone which was loved ends or is lost (McGuire et al., 2016). Such emotions should not be limited to the death of a loved one. The inability to attain one's dreams can result in grief, as well as a time of transition to something new. Grief is a common part of the human experience as various factors can lead to loss (Martello-Gill, 2019; McGuire et al., 2016). Grief can open doors to other emotions. For example, feelings of shame and guilt are commonly reported by parents of transitioning children (Norwood, 2013).

Ambiguous Loss

Wahlig (2015) discussed how parents of transgender children experience ambiguous loss. By this Wahlig means that that the dynamic and relationship which existed before the revelation of the gender transition has now changed so drastically, it feels for parents as if the child no longer exists though the child is still alive and present. Professionals can offer support by helping parents find meaning in the transition (Wahlig,

2015). Parents who understand their own personal experience and the needs of their child can better guide and support their child.

Parents of transgender children experience loss because the gender-centric hopes, expectations, and relations had with the child have changed greatly as the child transitions (Wahlig, 2015). Ambiguous loss is discussed as an experience not only from the perspective of the parents, but from the transitioning child as well (Wahlig, 2015). Reflective of other literature in the field, Wahlig recognizes that family units embody and communicate from one generation to the next the gender-centric norms of society (Marshall et al., 2019; Wahlig, 2015). This perpetuates the challenges that transgender children face. Including the parent's ambiguous loss experience adds a perspective to the field, which is often overlooked (Wahlig, 2015). This article adds greater conviction to my belief that the loss experienced by parents of transgender children needs greater study, as more knowledge in this area can better prepare counselors in servicing transgender children and their parents.

It is important that counseling professionals take into consideration how to meet the needs of the parents as parents play an important supportive role in a child's development. In order to support that role, counselors can help parents understand the sense of ambiguous loss they may experience as a result of the changing family dynamic (Wahlig, 2015).

Assuming that parents of transgender children may be experiencing ambiguous loss, Wahlig goes on to describe this experience as a sense of loss or death of the child experienced by the parent, though the child is still alive and present. It is the change in

presence, such as appearance and differing gender expectations, that indicates this experience. The term “ambiguous loss” is discussed within the concept of this theory. The conclusions of this study suggest that loss is experienced and that parents are uncertain of how to relate to their children, though they want to support them and help them to be successful. This publication is reflective of other literature in the field in that it discusses the challenges our society’s gender-centric norms present to children who do not identify with their sex at birth (Bull & D’Arrigo-Patrick, 2018; Marshall et al., 2019; Miller, 2020). Its focus on the concept of ambiguous loss in relation to this experience adds to the established literature and has improved upon my own understanding of this topic as I want to focus on empowering parents of transgender children in properly supporting their children. Wahlig recognizes that families of transgender children are also going through a transition of their own. This recognition, and the necessity to have counselors address it, is a growing trend in research (Bull & D’Arrigo-Patrick, 2018).

Ambiguous loss is upheld as a lens through which clinical care can be viewed by policy makers, clinicians, and educators. Wahlig’s study looks at the boundaries that exist in the relationships between transgender youth and their parents. The ambiguities existing in these relationships are given specific focus. The uncertainty that children face regarding the level of acceptance their parents will offer is also focused on, with the possibilities of grief, psychological distress, and ambiguous loss being concepts. Being that participants from ten regions across three countries were involved, this study’s findings can be seen as substantial. Similar to other studies, it is evident that transgender children need the support of their parents and that parents need to be empowered in order

to properly support their children (Bull & D'Arrigo-Patrick, 2018; Marshall et al., 2019; Miller, 2020). Transgender children lead longer, happier lives, and have more successful adulthoods with support. This study encourages my belief that some counselors may require additional training to meet the needs of not only transgender children but their parents as well. This study shows that using the lens of ambiguous loss is a productive way to assist transgender youth, as well as improve their lifespan (Bull & D'Arrigo-Patrick, 2018; Marshall et al., 2019; Miller, 2020).

Coolhart et al.'s (2018) study explored ambiguous loss as experienced by parents of transgender children. Interpretive phenomenological analysis was the process used to examine data taken from interviews which were completed by participants. The interviews were semi structured in their design. Results show that ambiguous loss was not felt by all parents, and that some parents' sense of loss manifested as grief.

Testoni and Pinducciu (2019) defined transgender identity as having self-awareness of how one's personal gender identity is not in alignment with the sex one was assigned at birth. Fueled by a constructionist perspective, this study emphasized how children's development was influenced by a culture's gender representations and sex-typing. This study recognized how mourning and a2mbiguous loss were common experiences for parents when being faced with the transgender identity of a child.

Participants were recruited with the help of 97 associations that work with Gay Lesbian, Bisexual, and Transgender (GLBT) individuals (Testoni & Pinducciu, 2019). These associations transcended any one country, and instead were found throughout the United States, Spain, and Italy. This study was qualitative in nature and utilized a

questionnaire, which was completed by 18 participants. The process included a brief narrative of the parents' experience of their child's gender transition, proceeded by the questionnaire. The researchers sought to inquire about whether parents experienced feelings of mourning during their child's transition. Results of the study revealed three essential features. The first feature was mourning similar to what is observed in profound loss or death. The second feature is a feeling of disenfranchisement as there is a fear of society's response to the transition. Lastly, mourning gives way to a restorative experience. This study is reflective of other literature in that it acknowledges the sense of loss parents may experience as their child transitions. The diversity of the participants' cultural and national background is appreciated as it provides more authenticity to the finding and allows for data to be applied to more than one group. My understanding of the topic is reinforced by the findings of this study, and the three essential features found in this study may be reflective of answers my participants could share.

Coping

Parents of transgender children may need assistance in becoming the support system that their transitioning child needs (Martello-Gill, 2019). Budge et al. (2013) examined the effectiveness of facilitative and avoidant coping techniques as mediating strategies pertaining to the relationship regarding distress and factors such as loss, social support, and transition status of transgender individuals. Three hundred fifty-one transgender individuals participated in Budge et al.'s study. Their participation involved completing an assessment related to transgender identity. Assessment measures pertaining to this identity included perceptions of loss related to transgender identity and

the possibility of a family history of mental health concerns. Concepts such as anxiety, coping, and depression were also included. Rates of anxiety and depression reported by these participants exceed rates reported by the general population. A total of 47.5% of transgender men reported anxiety, while 48.3% of these participants reported depression. Transgender women reported anxiety at 40.4% and depression at 51.4%. This study demonstrates that depression and anxiety are experienced by individuals who have transitioned at a higher rate than the general population. This reinforces the findings of Martello-Gill (2019) who emphasizes the need for transitioning children to have a capable and resourceful support group.

The coping methods adopted by parents who experienced ambiguous loss varied, and some methods seemed to be gender specific. Strategies clinicians can introduce to parents of transgender children are discussed in this study. Western culture's deep-seated gender binary system was considered and reflected on by two male participants. Participants considered how they understood this system, as well as how they counteracted conforming to its norms. Their perceptions have been informed by the experiences had with the gender transition of their children. Such experiences have caused these participants to reject the strict gender norms presented by society. The families of these two male participants were separated from those who adhere to society's normative binary approach to gender. This was accomplished via abiding by the ideas which have sprung from their familial experiences (Coolhart et al, 2018).

According to Norwood (2013) there are a growing number of families who have a transgender family member, leading to more discussion and consideration regarding how

relationships are affected by how sex and gender influence identity. This creates a challenge for many families, who often report an experience akin to a living death. This experience results from the change in relationship with the transitioning person, who may be changing physically as well. The intent of this study was to understand both this struggle, as well as the connection between ambiguous loss and meaning making. Norwood recognized the importance of meaning making and its link to ambitious loss.

The ways in which families found meaning in their struggle with transition and with how personal identity is influenced by sex and gender was analyzed in Norwood's study. The results of this study suggest that creating a sense of meaning helps people to endure hardships and overcome them. A sense of meaning also helps families avoid grief related to the changing relations caused by the transition. Norwood's study reaffirms the importance of familial support for transgender individuals, and it also reaffirms the difficulties their families face.

According to Budge et al. (2013) and Bull and D'Arrigo-Patrick (2018), coping strategies vary among the transgender community depending on which stage of the transition they are in. Practitioners can help improve the mental health of transgender clients by providing them with resources pertaining to social support as well as equipping them with strategies that will reduce avoidant coping measures (Budge et al., 2013). These strategies should be in line with the individuals' stage of transition. Examples of such strategies include in-session roleplay guided by the counselor. The counselor can guide the client in discussions and conversations that allow for avoidant coping measures to be identified. Another strategy to assist the client in evading avoidant coping measures

would be journaling. The counselor can provide journal topics and prompts dealing with the client's experience. This guided journaling will allow for the client to explore their experiences as opposed to ignoring them. Studies by Budge et al. (2013) and Bull and D'Arrigo-Patrick (2018) demonstrate that transgender individuals face numerous mental health challenges such as anxiety and depression. Recognition of this fact confirms the challenges that other studies have mentioned regarding this population and the ramifications of society's strict gender norms on their wellbeing (Budge et al., 2013; Martello-Gill, 2019).

Bull and D'Arrigo-Patrick (2018) proposed that parental support is a major influencer in a child's life, and this is especially true of transgender children. The way in which transgender children interact in society in general is greatly influenced by their experiences in the family unity, notably in the area of the parent/child relationship. Eight parents who facilitated the social transition of their transgender child between the ages of four and twelve were the participants who contributed to this study. Results of the study demonstrate the commonality of finding meaning in their child's gender identity. Discussions concerning gender expectations in the family and in society ensued, as did conversation regarding an initial sense of loss in the family unit. Bull and D'Arrigo-Patrick's study focused on the meaning parents find during their child's transition. This study attempted to go beyond the standard narrative of experiencing loss, resulting in the identified realms of meaning. This adds a deeper dimension than other studies which examine the experience of loss in these familial situations. It also confirms previously stated information regarding the parents of transgender children.

It is not only the child who changes during a gender transition, but parents may undergo a change as well (Martello-Gill, 2019). This transition is fueled by emotions and experiences. Emotions will change and be reexperienced, as feelings of loss and confusion can coincide with feelings of happiness and support. Counselors should inform parents that the coexistence of these conflicting emotions are natural (Martello-Gill, 2019). It is common for parents to feel an array of emotions. The purpose of Martello-Gill's study was to better understand the experience of parents of transgender teens. Phenomenological inquiry, along with the conduction of numerous open-ended interviews, were implemented to better understand the experiences of these parents. Results of this method demonstrated that parents could make meaning from their experiences and that their love for their children was instrumental in facing challenges. Concepts such as grief, loss, and acceptance were discussed. The importance of parental support for transitioning teens is recognized in this study, and these findings bolster that knowledge which was established in previous studies. Martello-Gill's study demonstrated that parents want to support their children. The problem is that parents often do not know how to support their transgender child. The strengths of this study are evident as much data was gathered and participants had the opportunity to explain their responses.

Kuvalanka et al.'s (2017) study provides detailed information regarding the peer relations, gender presentations, and wellbeing of trans and gender-nonconforming (TGNC) youth between the ages of 6 and 12. This is accomplished via community-based samples from caregivers of TGNC children from this age group. There was a total of 45 participants who were mostly White. A total of 69% of the children were cross-gender

identified (CGI). From this group, 28 children were labeled as male at birth, but 17 identified as girls. Also, out of the 17 children assigned as female at birth, 14 identified as boys. The remaining 14 children identified themselves either as nonbinary, as gender-nonconforming, or as uncertain about their gender. Non-CGI was the designation given to this subgroup. Children in the CGI group reported better peer relationships than ones in the non-CGI group. Children in the CGI group also reported less problems than those in the non-CGI group. Caregivers reported comparable rates of depression, with only a slightly elevated rate of anxiety. Results of this study show the importance of familial support and affirmation for TGNC children. This study compliments other studies in affirming the mental health challenges disproportionately faced by the transgender community as well as the difficult experiences felt by those who care for them. The importance of familial support is another confirmation reflected by other literature (Alegria, 2016). This demonstrates the relevance of my own research study as it demonstrates that parents of transgender children need to be affirmed in their experiences and empowered in supporting their children (Kuvalanka et al., 2017).

Field and Mattson (2016) reported how parents of transgender children face greater parenting challenges when compared to the experiences of parents of gay, lesbian, and bisexual children. Challenges reported by this group include the physical changes that happen to the child during the transition as well as the tensions experienced in public during the transition process. Other difficulties stem from a lack of positive representation of transgender people in the popular media. Parents of transgender children also reportedly experienced a change in their own identity as their child

transitioned. Anti-trans sentiment in society has led parents to feel isolated, and a lack of resources has heightened the difficulties these parents face. Though there were definite differences, parents of transgender children reported some similarities to the experiences of parents of gay, lesbian, and bisexual children. These similarities include fears of bad parenting and experiences of mourning and grief. This study goes beyond the generalization of society's-imposed gender norms and delves into how transgender individuals are portrayed in the media. This was accomplished via open-ended interview questions, allowing for prominence to be given to topics often not covered concerning this population. The transgender community is largely ignored in media and is often stereotyped when they are represented. The influence of this portrayal on transgender children and their parents adds to what is already established in the literature. This article provided me with a greater understanding regarding the experience of isolation transgender parents feel, as well as ways in which that experience can be alleviated via the recognition of the four similarities shared by parents of GLBT children. This research's emphasis on how parents view their own changing identity and their response to public events provides a depth that is often lacking in other studies.

Summary

There exist several themes which are evident in the current literature, creating a unifying thread which brings to light important factors which must be addressed when moving forward with new studies. First, it is evident that culture influences how an assigned gender influences how individuals see themselves, their relationships, their roles and their goals. It is also evident that these societal perspectives are formed in the family

unit as individuals are assigned the gender-centric roles designated as mother, father, son and daughter (Wahlig, 2015).

Another recognizable theme is that a child's transition causes change for the parents as well (Martello-Gill, 2019). This is important to note because parental support is a major influencer in the life of a child (Bull & D'Arrigo-Patrick, 2018). Also, transgender children stated the need they have for support from parents (Catapla & McGuire, 2018). The important role that parents play in the life of their transgender children necessitates that the ambiguity and loss they experience must be understood by professionals so that their needs and the needs of their children may be met (Catapla & McGuire, 2018). Parents of transgender children may need professional support and access to applicable resources because they face greater challenges than parents of gender conforming children (Field & Mattson, 2016). These challenges are exasperated by society's anti-trans sentiment (Field & Mattson, 2016). It is commonly admitted that research regarding the emotional experiences of transgender children and their parents is quite limited (Coolhart et al, 2018). This limited research is troubling, especially when considering the growing visibility of families which include a trans-identified member (Norwood, 2013).

Parents of transgender children may experience mourning, confusion, and loss regarding their child's transition (Testoni & Pinducciu, 2019). Parents may want to better understand their experiences so that they can work toward understanding and supporting their child (Coolhart et al, 2018). It is necessary that this topic continue to be studied so that additional literature can inform professionals as they assist parents in understanding

their experience, which is an important step in offering the support their transitioning children need.

Very little research has taken into consideration the sense of loss experienced by the parents and how this experience influences their effectiveness as support for their children. A review of existing literature does provide necessary context regarding the impact of culture on one's perception of the gender they were assigned as well as how nonconformity has historically been responded to by professionals in the counseling field (Miller, 2020; Norwood, 2013a; West & Zimmerman, 1990).

In chapter three, I will discuss the way in which data was gathered and analyzed for the purpose of my study. This research will address gaps in the current literature by providing context to the experiences of parents who have a transgender child. I explored the ways in which parents of transgender children experience their child's transition via semi structured interviews. I utilized a hermeneutical phenomenological approach to accomplish this. Counselors and other healthcare professionals will have a better understanding of the parents' experiences regarding the transition of their child due to my study. The result of my study will offer more knowledge in this area, allowing for counselors to be better equipped when providing support to these parents of transitioning children. This is paramount because transgender identities are still a topic of misunderstanding, even amongst professionals.

Chapter 3: Research Method

Introduction

Individuals who identify with a gender other than the one their biological sex have long been a marginalized population in society. Though this demographic is increasing in visibility, stigma against it remains amongst both the general populace and professionals. Counselors, belonging to a field which advocates social change on behalf of the oppressed, must be competent in servicing the needs of this community. One important element of this support requires being able to service transgender children and their families. In order to equip the parents with what is necessary to support their children, counselors must first understand the experiences of these parents in order to meet their needs. This study explored how parents of transgender children experience and react to their child's gender transition. A hermeneutic phenomenological design was implemented in this study so that a detailed overview of the parental experience could be explored. Comparing the experience of these parents against the five stages of grief was central to this undertaking.

This chapter will outline the benefits of using a hermeneutic phenomenological design. This design allowed me to delve into the meaning parents have taken from their experiences. The five stages of grief will be compared to the experiences shared by participants. The role of the researcher will be discussed in this chapter, especially with regard to the safeguards that were established to protect the identity of the participants as well as the information that was shared. The reality that this topic involves the exploration of difficult personal information is also discussed.

The management of researcher bias is covered in this chapter. The population of this study is identified, and the sampling strategy is justified, while the criteria for participant selection is stated. Criteria for inclusion and exclusion is clearly categorized. Semi structured interviews were the instrument of data collection in this study.

The interview questions used in this study are listed in this chapter and an explanation of how participants exited the study is provided. The selection of the debriefing procedure for the exit process is explained in detail, as well as the actual procedure itself. Lastly, issues of trustworthiness and ethical concerns as they relate to the data are reflected on.

The purpose of this study was to provide better insight into the experiences of parents who have a transgender child. The experiences of parents were ascertained via semi structured interviews. The outcomes of this hermeneutic phenomenological study will provide counselors with a deeper understanding of these experiences while also placing them in a proper context. This is essential as misunderstandings among the general populace and even professionals persist regarding transgender identities. This study focused on the following question: How do parents of transgender children experience their child's gender transition?

Research Design and Rationale

Using a hermeneutic design allowed me to shed light on the essence of the participants' unique experience of their child's gender transition (Neubauer et al., 2019). Qualitative methods are implemented to gather information, especially detailed and personal experiences (Neubauer et al., 2019). I was interested in studying how parents of

transgender children experience and react to their child's gender transition. Do they grieve? Do they feel scared or angry? Do they feel a sense of loss? Do they seek support from medical professionals or from family? Do they consider seeking aid from other parents who have had similar experiences? Such inquiry can be answered via the use of a hermeneutic phenomenological design (Neubauer et al., 2019).

I implemented this design as I analyzed each parents' responses to my interview questions, as such experiences could not easily be quantified (see Groenewald, 2018). Data for my study were gathered by interviewing parents of transgender children. I examined the views of parents of transgender children as I attempted to shed light on the essence of this parental experience (see Neubauer et al., 2019). I recruited participants for this study by posting recruitment flyers at the LGBT Community Center in Cleveland, Ohio. I was also granted permission to utilize Walden University's participant pool to recruit participants. I required between 6 and 12 participants to reach saturation (see Groenewald, 2018). A hermeneutic phenomenological design was beneficial for my study, as I was able to present a detailed and profound overview of the experience had by parents of transgender children (see Ungvarsky, 2020).

Research Question

How do parents of transgender children experience their child's gender transition?

Central Concepts/Phenomenon of the Study

Grief can be experienced at various points in one's life and can be the result of various causes (Coor & Coor, 2020). Loss and great change of differing kinds can be a cause of grief, with circumstances such as divorce, facing a serious illness, and the

passing of a loved one being common causes of grief (Coor & Coor, 2020). The research of Kübler-Ross recognized and established five stages in which grief was commonly experienced. These stages are categorized as *denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance*. These stages can be experienced in varying degrees and can be revisited during the process. *On Death and Dying* is the book where Kübler-Ross first outlines and expounds upon her five stages of grief model which itself resulted from her work with terminally ill individuals (Corr & Coor, 2020). Some individuals may not even experience each stage as this outline is not intended to be a linear step-by-step process. (Coor & Coor, 2020). Still, Ross found that these five stages were commonly felt among those who were experiencing grief (Corr & Coor, 2020).

The five stages were what I wanted to explore. It was my intent to understand whether the revelation of a child's new gender identity and the subsequent choice to transition to that identity causes parents to undergo a pattern of loss like the five stages of grief (Coor & Coor, 2020). Not every individual experiencing grief will undergo every stage. Field and Mattson (2016) note that the gender transitioning process is demanding and can cause grief. Grief can be experienced by the individual transitioning as well as their loved ones (Field & Mattson, 2016).

Parents of transgender children may experience emotions of powerlessness in the face of a society which still marginalizes transgender individuals. This ostracism limits the resources these families should be able to access (Field & Mattson, 2016). Emotions of powerlessness and loss may result in parents blaming themselves for the trying

experiences their family is now facing because of the gender transition (Field & Mattson, 2016).

Role of the Researcher

My study necessitated that I access the feelings and thoughts of parents of transgender children. To manage my own personal bias, I allowed participants of the study the option to review the transcription of their interview. This afforded participants the opportunity to clarify or expound upon what was transcribed. I also went over my findings with my dissertation panel and provided them with my study transcripts. This allowed my panel the opportunity to give constructive feedback and to pinpoint potential gaps in my argument that I may have missed.

Semi structured interviews were used for this study. This type of interview structure permitted participants to elaborate and expound upon their answers. It also gave participants the opportunity to deviate from the script and discuss their own unique experiences and stories.

My approach was qualitative in nature. The experience of parents was the focus of my research. I sought themes when analyzing and transcribing my interviews (Jamshed, 2014; Neubauer et al., 2019). One theme that emerged was a sense of loss reported by parents during the transition of their child. Once each interview was transcribed, I implemented the hermeneutic approach of analysis. Reoccurring patterns were identified. This process gained momentum as more participant responses showed similarities (Choy, 2014).

Participant Selection

My study included a set of required inclusion criteria. All participants were required to be the biological or adoptive parents of children who have transitioned to a gender identity which differs from their biological sex at birth. At a minimum, the child must have *socially transitioned*. For the purpose of this study, a child is considered to be socially transitioned once the following criteria have been met: (a) participants must be over the age of eighteen; (b) participants must be fluent in the English language; (c) the choice to make the transition to the authentic gender is driven by the child's feeling that the birth assigned at sex is not congruent with their own experience of gender; (d) the transition process is preceded by the child's revealing of their authentic gender identity to other individuals; (e) aspects of transition involve changes on the cosmetic, legal and social levels, notwithstanding the implementation of medical interventions; and (f) referred pronouns are shared with others and the legal adoption of a new name is possible.

Similarly, there was a set of exclusion criteria. Residents of any of the following facilities: prison, treatment facility, nursing home, assisted living, group home for minors. Individuals who have been deemed by the state to be mentally disabled. Individuals who do not meet inclusion criteria.

Sampling Strategy

The phenomenon of interest in this study was the experience of having a child who has transitioned from their biological sex at birth to their identified gender. This study made use of purposive samples and snowball samples by selecting participants

(parents) who have had that experience. The type of sampling strategy I used is called purposive sampling. Purposive sampling involves handpicking participants that possess the specific information or insights needed to address the research questions, ensuring that the sample is tailored to provide valuable and targeted data for the study. I categorized participants based on previously chosen conditions pertaining to a specified research inquiry (Suen et al., 20124). Being that I was sampling participants with preselected criteria (parents of transgender children), purposive sampling was most appropriate (Suen et al., 2014). In addition, I used snowball sampling so that previous participants could refer potential participants to my study. Snowball sampling involves identifying initial participants with a particular trait or experience relevant to the study and then relying on their help to refer additional participants who also possess the desired characteristics. My target sample size was 6-12 participants with saturation being my goal (Fleury et al., 2016). There came a point in the information gathering process in which new insight into the question was no longer attained. Known as *theoretical saturation*, this condition was a factor in shaping my sample size (Suen et al., 2014).

Recruiting Participants

To recruit participants, I adopted several strategies. I recruited participants by posting flyers at an LGBT center in Cleveland, Ohio. This center is in charge of planning LGBT community events (e.g., Cleveland Pride) throughout the year. The Center also maintains contact with several other local LGBT resources and centers Contact information for the center is located on the website and the center runs on normal business hours (Mon-Fri 10am-8pm).

Interested individuals were asked to e-mail me their contact information. I responded to all e-mails and informed interested individuals that they could contact me via phone or e-mail if they had questions about the study, the process, how findings will be used/disseminated, and if they would like to participate.

Once a participant agreed to engage in my study, I e-mailed them individually. The e-mail contained the date and time of the interview, a Zoom link for the interview, and information about scheduling an optional follow-up interview. This e-mail also included informed consent information which had to be completed prior to the participant completing the Zoom interview.

Data Collection

My research question was best answered by a qualitative hermeneutic approach, which focused on the normative happenings of parents' lived experiences. The aims of this qualitative approach were to identify and describe the nature of the experienced phenomenon (Creswell, 2013; Rosenberg, 2019). The phenomenon can be an event, situation, or experience. This studied phenomenon took the form of interviews given to parents who have first-hand experience with their child's gender transition. The interviews aimed to answer two questions (Moustakas, 1994; Rosenberg, 2019). The first question asks about the individual's experience with regard to the phenomenon. The second question aims to understand what contexts or situations influenced how the phenomenon was experienced (Creswell, 2013; Rosenberg, 2019). Semi structured interviews were used to gather data. Interviews were transcribed and analyzed with the

intent of identifying commonly reoccurring phrases and themes, which I then categorized (Creswell, 2013; Rosenberg, 2019).

Participants exited the study via the debriefing procedure. This allowed for the participant and I to discuss details pertaining to the study itself. This was accompanied by a tangible debriefing statement that each participant received at the conclusion of their participation. Appropriate resources, contact information, and any details not known prior to the study were shared during the debriefing process. Due to the personal and possibly distressing nature of this study, the debriefing process was necessary in that it allowed for me to ensure that participants exited the study in the same condition in which they entered it. My debriefing procedure included:

1. Title of the study
2. Name of the investigator
3. Why the study was being conducted and what I expect to learn from the study.
4. The research question being used in the study.
5. Withdrawal procedures and the opportunity to implement them was clearly stated in lay language.
6. Any possible results of the study which are attained at that time were included.
7. The participants were informed of whether they will be informed of the results of the study. If so, then a timeframe will be included.

8. Contact info for the IRB chair, applicable supportive services, my professional contact information, and research references was communicated (IRB approval # 11-28-22-0531879).
9. Finally, the participants were thanked for their partaking in this study.

Data Analysis Plan

To communicate applied meaning in an impactful way, I reviewed and transcribed recorded data gained during the interviews. This tactic is common in a hermeneutic phenomenological approach to qualitative studies (Jansen, 2018). It was important that I conveyed how the parents perceived their experience. Heidegger proposed that an individual's conscious experience is so highly impacted and formed by their personal history and lived experience, that a lens is created through which all new events are comprehended. According to this theory, an individual's culture and personal history are so foundational to one's understanding that all new knowledge will reference this lens. Heidegger sought to understand individuals by investigating the narratives they themselves have created. This approach will go to the heart of the experiences and history from which this lens of understanding has been forged (Neubauer, Witkop, & Varpio, 2019). My analysis uncovered themes of the parents' lived experience and I conveyed this in a descriptive sense (Castleberry & Nolen, 2018). I used thematic analysis when reading through interview transcripts (Castleberry & Nolen, 2018). I identified patterns, topics, and their frequency (Castleberry & Nolen, 2018). This process gained momentum when participant responses showed similarities (i.e., if similar themes or patterns began to emerge; Choy, 2014). I took a normative approach to conducting thematic analysis by

following an eight-step process. These steps began with becoming familiar with the data, followed by coding and identifying themes (Kiger & Varipo, 2020).

1. Conduct and transcribe initial interviews.
2. Conduct and transcribe optional follow up interviews if there are gaps in data such as miscommunication or unclear definitions.
3. Read and edited/deleted irrelevant information.

a) ORIGINAL TRANSCRIPTION

b) P2: “Angry for a long time. But you also know that. Love is all you’re going

c) to have. Love is all you going to have at the end of the day.”

d) REVISION

e) P2: “[I felt] angry for a long time, but [I] also know that love is all you're going to have at the end of the day.”

4. Create meaning units and discern themes. Example- shock and denial

a) P1: “I was flabbergasted.”

b) P2: “I feel like I’m still [alone] on an island after getting over the initial shit and the shock.”

c) P3: “It’s difficult because, you know, you have a son and then you don’t.”

d) P4: “Denial at first and then questioning…”

e) P5: “Initially I was shocked and kind of thought this could not be real.”

5. Begin coding 2nd round (using my own interpretive lens).
6. Note any additional themes or commonalities. Example- fear

a) P3: “A part of me dreaded speaking to other people about what was going on and the life of my son.”

b) P5: “I was afraid he would kill himself because he was so unhappy, and people were so mean.”

7. Create general narratives: “most” = saturated theme, “many” = 50% theme, “some” = theme that was unsaturated but relevant

8. Themes were compiled into a general narrative of the phenomenon (summary of participants’ experiences). Common themes were identified as shock and/or denial, a sense of grief and/or loss, feelings of helplessness, acceptance, fear, internal conflict, and feelings of failure.

9. Last, I provided a summary and phenomenological analysis of the population as it relates to Heidegger’s theory. According to Heidegger, *Dasein* refers to the fundamental nature of human existence, emphasizing our unique ability to experience and interpret the world. *Mitsein* is also a concept introduced by the philosopher Martin Heidegger, referring to the fundamental mode of human existence as being-with-others. It emphasizes the idea that our existence is fundamentally intertwined with others, and that our relationships with others play a crucial role in shaping our identity and understanding of the world.

Issues of Trustworthiness

Studies must be reliable and valid to be meaningful in their field (Lawrence, 2015). This means that methods must be appropriate and that the research and its findings must be sound (Lawrence, 2015). One potential criticism of my qualitative research may

be that it can be viewed 2as a collection of opinions which have been analyzed according to my own bias (Lawrence, 2015). Another criticism might be that its analytical procedures lack transparency, and that method justification is poor (Lawrence, 2015). Other critics may site that this design has an absence of scientific thoroughness (Lawrence, 2015). It was necessary that I demonstrated rigor and properly justified my methods and procedures. I also had to be mindful of my own bias.

The trustworthiness of my findings was evident in the methodological strategies I used and integrated (Lawrence, 2015). My strategies included an ongoing reflection of my own bias, an ongoing assessment of the applicability of my methods, and thorough record keeping (Lawrence, 2015). Participant accounts were offered verbatim so that findings could be supported and the reasoning behind my interpretation could be understood (Lawrence, 2015).

Credibility

There exists a relational reality between the data being researched and the researcher. This relationship is emphasized in hermeneutic phenomenology, where the researcher translates the experiences of the participant while comparing the experiences of others who have identified the same phenomenon as their experience. The implementation of hermeneutic phenomenology in this research was used in a hermeneutic circle exemplified via proven processes. My chosen method included documenting and reviewing my assumptions, experiences, and interpretations of the studied phenomenon by writing about both my journaling during the process as well as

the follow-up interviews. This allowed for my personal bias to be identified and for revisions to be made because of recognizing these existing biases.

I also used member checking, which will allow participants who provided the information the opportunity to review the transcripts for accuracy. The accuracy of the results is not dependent on whether participants agree with the results or not. In this study, I asked participants to confirm the accuracy of the transcripts. Their view of the interpretation was not a part of the inquiry.

Transferability

Similar insights found among participants with similar situations do not equate sameness of experience. Generalization of findings and results should be avoided, while facets such as setting, experiences, and participants existing as individuals should be considered. Still, similarities in experience can offer insight to others in like situations. Counselors can reference these experiences when working with parents of transgender children.

Dependability

Replication of this study can be achieved by following the detailed audit trail outlined in Chapter 3. The dependability of this research and its results was maintained through the thorough description of the research process itself. Equivalent findings should result if this research's steps are repeated in a similar context with the same phenomenon and inclusion/exclusion criteria.

Confirmability

Chapter 3 highlights areas of potential bias with the intent of protecting the research from this predisposition. This was accomplished using journaling while also projecting predicted outcomes. The lived experience of parents was emphasized during the continuous occurrence of biases. Journaling, along with the reflection process, allowed for the aim of choosing suitable conclusions over predisposed conceptions to be realized. New meaning took the place of preconceived projections, as competing projections became easily identified.

Confidentiality and Ethics

Protecting the rights of the participants, including their confidentiality, is a task of paramount importance in any study. Identifiable information was omitted codes were used as designations in place of participant names. A researcher-participant agreement, approved by Walden's IRB, was used in this study (IRB approval # 11-28-22-0531879).

Due to the personal nature of this data, I am expected to protect the data I collect and the identity of the participants who relayed it. I discussed with each participant what safeguards were established and how they would be implemented. In addition, these safeguard mechanisms were approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) before the research was initiated. The participants of any study have rights that are to be protected, and it is my responsibility to ensure that the welfare of the participants of my study are upheld. This was ensured via used resources and implemented protocols which will be reviewed by the IRB's group process. This review covered the IRB application itself as well as the official informed consent forms which were used.

The rights of participants who are human subjects was recognized by the Research Act of 1974 which was passed in the United States (Groves et al., 2009), and this led to the 1991 revision of the Regulations for the Protection of Human Subjects of Research. Groves et al. (2009) states that surveys are actually excused from review by the Institutional Review Board (IRB). However, this changes if identifiable data regarding the participants is accessible via means either direct or indirect.

Walden University (2019) mandates that doctoral students are not to recruit or collect data from participants until they secure approval from the IRB. The *Code of Ethics* adhered to by the American Counseling Association clearly states that participants not only have a choice in participation, but that researchers must maintain the confidentiality of participants' identifiable information (ACA, 2014, G.1.b. & G.2.a.). This same *Code of Ethics* also mandates that federal laws and ethical guidelines concerning research practices be adhered to by researchers in the planning and design stages, as well as when conducting the research (ACA, 2014, G.1.a., p. 15).

Doctoral students at Walden University are aided and guided in numerous ways by the university's IRB as students are provided with office hours and contact information so they may ask questions and receive direction regarding questions pertaining to their research study. This is especially helpful when sensitive topics are the focus of the study (Walden University, 2019). Certain items and issues are noted in what the university refers to as "Red Flags Issues." Students interested in investigating any of these issues are to consult with the IRB. Common examples of "Red Flags Issues" are proposals dealing with the developmentally disabled and children under the age of 17

(Walden University, 2019). I consulted with Walden University's IRB during the designated office hours to obtain my study's approval before advancing to the proposal stage.

This study was conducted in adherence to the American Counseling Association's *Code of Ethics* as well as all of the ethical guidelines set forth by the Walden University's IRB *(ACA, 2014)*. The recruitment of potential participants was accomplished in cooperation with the LGBT Community Center in Cleveland, Ohio. These potential participants were contacted e-mail. Participation did not begin without the participant's signed consent, which was developed in accordance with the American Counseling Association's *Code of Ethics (ACA, 2014,* G.2.a). Remley and Herlihy (2016), as well as the American Counseling Association's *Code of Ethics* (2014) in (G.1.b.), emphasized the role of the researcher in safeguarding the protection of the rights of the participants. This includes providing codes in the place of identifiable information and the deletion of identifiable information.

Confidential information was safely stored on a password protected desktop computer. This computer was located in a locked filing cabinet in my residence. I currently have a 24-hour camera surveillance monitoring system in my residence which will provide an additional layer of protection. This same protection will be in place after the study has been completed for the duration of five years, which is required by the regulations established by the IRB.

Ethical Concerns Related to Data Collection

Psychological stress greater than what one would experience in daily life (minimal): Parents may find the topic and questions of the study to be psychologically distressing. The topic or questions may trigger unresolved anger, sadness, depression, grief or other emotions. Minor negative effects on participants' health (minimal): Mental health- Parents may find the topic and questions of the study to be psychologically distressing. The topic or questions may trigger unresolved anger, sadness, depression, grief or other emotions.

Steps taken to minimize risks and to protect the welfare of the participants and the stakeholders included selecting parents whose children are post transition by at least one year. In addition, I am provided a list of resources to all participants. These resources included contacts for local counselors and support groups who will be able to provide assistance if this exercise is found by the participants to be emotionally distressing.

Protections for Confidential Data

Information was safely stored on a desktop computer. The location of this computer is a locked room in my residence. My residence is surveilled by a 24-hour camera monitoring system. Documents were password protected and survey the names of the participants were redacted and replaced with a code. Hard copies of research data will reside in my locked home office and will be separate from HIPPA and consent authorization forms. These forms were also locked. Computers will be closed, and passwords will protect electronic files until data is transferred. PHI data such as

recruitment records, contact information, and other related documents will be destroyed when it is no longer necessary for the research.

Summary

The hermeneutic phenomenological approach of this study guided the semi structured interviews which were paramount to this research. Qualitative in nature, this study explored personal experiences of the participants, while appropriate measures are taken to protect these participants and their wellbeing. This research is necessary for professionals in the counseling field because those who work with transgender children and their families can have a vital role in the healing process. The currently limited amount of research pertaining to the parents of children who have or who are transitioning will be enhanced by this work. Another outcome of this research is that it will also assist parents in understanding potential challenges regarding the transition of their child.

Chapter 4: Results

Introduction

Numerous challenges and stigmas are faced by transgender children. These challenges come not only from society, but also from their families and friends. Due to the immensity of the problems encountered, transgender children benefit greatly when they receive support from their parents. (Hillier & Torg, 2019). Parents of transgender children need proper support, resources, and understanding regarding the needs of their transgender child as well as their own experiences. Without this professional support, the parent/child relationship can be damaged and the child's development into adulthood can be greatly hindered or even harmed (Miller, 2020). Counselors can offer support by helping parents find meaning in their child's transition (Wahlig, 2015). Parents who understand their own personal experience and the needs of their child can better guide and support their child.

The purpose of the hermeneutic phenomenological study was to understand and provide context to the experiences of parents who have a transgender child. By interviewing parents of transgender children, I explored the ways in which parents of transgender children experience their child's transition. In this chapter, I present the research findings and connect the findings of this hermeneutic study. I discuss the process of data collection and analysis.

Research Setting

This study was completed via Zoom. Recorded interviews lasted between 60-90 minutes. Participants were given the option to engage in follow-up interviews in order to provide additional insight or further clarification.

Demographics

Participants were categorized by age, gender, ethnicity, and the age of their child. The demographic information is shown in table one below.

Table 1.

Demographics of Participants

Participant	Participant age	Gender	Ethnicity/race	Child age
P1	62	Male	Other	39
P2	44	Male	African American	27
P3	40	Male	Other	6
P4	57	Female	Other	13
P5	63	Male	White	40
P6	49	Male	White	27

Note. P = Participant.

Data Collection

There was a total of six participants in this study. Participants were in the United States. Data were collected via audio recorded Zoom interviews, each lasting 60-90 minutes. There were no unusual circumstances encountered during data collection. The phenomenon of interest in this study was the experience of having a child who has transitioned from their biological sex at birth to their identified gender. This study made use of purposive samples and snowball samples by selecting participants (parents) who

have had that experience. In addition, I used snowball sampling so that previous participants could refer potential participants to this study.

Data Analysis

My first step in this process was to complete initial interviews with participants and to transcribe each interview. Follow up interviews were offered if there were gaps in data such as miscommunication or unclear definitions/verbiage. Any follow up interviews were also transcribed. Following these steps, I read and edited the interviews to delete duplicate words or phrases that were irrelevant. To appreciate the description of each experience in its entirety, I read the interview transcript of each participant and I began to discern themes and create meaning units such as *shock and denial*.

Once my initial round of coding was complete, I began a second round of coding using my own interpretive lens. Next, I noted any additional themes or commonalities that surfaced such as fear. I reviewed and defined themes (e.g., determining what each theme means and what it tells me about the data). Themes were then compiled into a general narrative of the participants' experiences. Last, using Heidegger's theory and key concepts, I provided a summary and phenomenological analysis of the population as it relates to Heidegger's theory (e.g., *Dasein* and *Mitsein*).

Thematic Meaning Units

Data collection and analysis was guided by the research question: What are the lived experiences of parents of transgender children? Seven themes emerged from the interviews:

1. Shock/denial (over child's transition)

2. Internal Conflict (over the transition)
3. Feelings of Failure (as a parent)
4. Grief/loss (of their child)
5. Helplessness (unsure of what to do)
6. Acceptance (of their new reality)
7. Fear (of the unknown)

Table 2.

Themes

Theme	P1	P2	P3	P4	P5	P6
Shock/denial (over child's transition)	x	x	x	x	x	X
Internal Conflict (over the transition)	x	x	x	x	x	X
Feelings of Failure (as a parent)	x	x	x	x	x	X
Grief/loss (of their child)	x	x	x		x	X
Helplessness (unsure of what to do)	x	x	x	x	x	
Acceptance (of their new reality)		x	x	x		X
Fear (of the unknown)			x		x	

Note. P = Participant.

Illustrated Themes

Based on the information gathered, common themes were as follows: shock and/or denial, a sense of grief and/or loss, feelings of helplessness, acceptance, fear, internal conflict and/or an internal sense of uneasiness, feelings of failure (e.g., questioning oneself, feeling like they did something wrong, questioning if they should have done something differently). All participants reported feelings of shock denial,

internal conflict, and feelings of failure. Most participants reported feelings of helplessness and feelings of grief/loss. Some participants reported feelings of acceptance and a couple of participants reported feelings of fear.

Theme 1: Shock/Denial Over Child's Transition

Participants reported experiencing shock and denial over the revelation of their child's transition. Participants reported experiencing shock and denial because they could not or were not ready to accept their new reality. One participant explained feeling like they were in disbelief and that this must be a stage or a phase that their child was going through. Another participant expressed feeling like their whole world had been turned upside down. Yet another discussed feeling like this could not be real or like this could not be happening to them.

Participant P1 stated, "I was flabbergasted. I'm not very happy about this." Participant P2 told me,

> [I felt] angry for a long time, but [I] also know that love is all you're going to have at the end of the day. So [my son] was a very good boy. It [he] was a girl I guess, but not what I think a girl is supposed to be. He started coming out to the people before coming to me. And so, this put a wedge between us. I was mad. My whole life started turning upside down. I feel like I'm still [alone] on an island after getting over the initial shit and the shock.

Participant P3 indicated that,

> It's difficult because, you know, you have a son and then you don't, and you interpret things. I'm coming to terms with things [that] I was hoping from my son

> [are] not going to happen because I don't have a son. It's still hard for me to understand. But I also know that I'd much rather have [my child] in my life than not. So, I'm trying to understand. It doesn't mean that I do completely understand. First, a lot of disbelief, thinking that this has got to be something else. This is going to pass. This isn't real. This is tv's fault. But do I really need to blame anybody? Is there really anyone to blame anything on? Or is this just something that you accept?

Participant P4 stated,

> Denial at first and then questioning and then sort of observing things and maybe [feeling] sadness that this isn't going to go as you thought it was going to go. I don't maintain sadness over it. It's just that you can kind of feel for the person. They have so much to go through as they continue to transition. You just feel bad for them knowing that there could be discrimination in a lot of different ways.

Participant P5 stated, “Initially I was shocked and kind of thought this could not be real.” Finally, Participant P6 also mentioned that “I was stunned. They’re not my little girl anymore. And according to [them], they never were.”

Theme 2: Internal Conflict Over the Transition

Participants reported experiencing internal conflict. Participants explained that they questioned their own parenting styles, and they expressed feeling unsure of how to navigate their child’s transition. Participants also reported feeling confused and feeling like they did something wrong as parents.

Participant P1 shared,

> I'm a man. Yet I find myself crying at times in the corner by myself, thinking, what could I have done to prevent this? And spiritually, I look to the sky and say, God, where are you or Lord, how can you allow something like this to occur? And I do worry about my child's soul. What's going to happen? And, you know, my doctor says, well, Mr. [redacted] you have to accept these things. You know that person is still your child.

Similarly, Participant P2 told me that,

> Maybe thinking [I] could have done [things] maybe just a little different at that time. I was confused and didn't really understand it. And I'm still confused and still don't always really understand it. At that time, I thought maybe [my child] was doing drugs, and maybe acting out.

Participant P3 also shared,

> Sometimes I wonder did I do something wrong? But I also have to admit that gender is more than just a choice. Look at the animals…. The male has its role. The female has its role. That's something I struggled with, whether there's something biologically in the DNA or whatever that I can't see.

Next, Participant P4 indicated,

> It's a challenge because you don't want to force them [your child] to be something that they do not feel inside that they are. It's sort of like doubt or denial and [learning that] my child's just a little bit different.

Participant P5 shared,

> He just felt like he was born with the wrong parts, but that he still likes men. It's confusing because if he is a guy now and he likes guys doesn't that make him gay? This has been very confusing. His sister was confused. I kept thinking maybe I did something wrong during my pregnancy, or maybe I should have done something different [as a parent].

Participant P6 shared,

> I know that a man is not supposed to be crying, but I did [cry]. I am still confused. But now I see that [my child] never really was [who I thought they were].

Theme 3: Feelings of Failure as a Parent

Participants reported experiencing feelings of failure, particularly as it relates to their role as a parent or their ability to parent correctly. Some participants reported feeling like they should have parented differently. One participant reported feeling like they let people down as a result of their child's transition. Participant P1 indicated that, I brought a son of this world. I feel betrayed and I think I could have accepted almost anything else, but I can't [accept] this."

Similarly, Participant P2 stated,

> I think I was a good father, but [this] makes me feel like maybe I don't know what I'm doing. Maybe I did everything wrong. So [it] does that make me wonder, what could I have done differently?"

Participant P3 indicated,

> Oh, you know, if I were a better man, a tougher man, [my child] would have had somebody to look up to. Maybe he started looking more toward [his mother]. Sometimes that's what you start thinking at first, like, what did I do wrong?"

Participant P4 stated,

> You begin questioning yourself or whether there's something unique about this one child as they're going along and [you get] concerned about them as individuals and [wonder] how it's going to be for them as they continue to mature and become adults.

Participant P5 told me that, "Sadness. Fear. Confusion, wondering what I did wrong, or if there was something I should have done [differently]." Finally, Participant P6 stated, "Sometimes I feel like I let so many people down."

Theme 4: Grief/Loss of Their Child

Participants reported experiencing grief, particularly as it related to feeling like their child died or feeling like they lost their child. One participant explained that it felt like their child died because they did not really know who their child was anymore. Another participant expressed feeling like everything in their whole life was dead. Participant P1 shared, "I have wrestled with this in my mind. I can't accept [it] anymore. I've tried, but it's such a big conflict of grief the way [that] I feel." Participant P2 told me that, "I don't have real happy memories to look back on because apparently, they were fake. You know, in a way, it's like everything died. My whole life died. [My child] died and I'm dead."

Participant P3 shared,

> If you had a kid that died, then people would have flocked around to show support. But in this case, it's like people want to flee from you instead. There are times in which it's just like I don't know my own kid, as if my own kid maybe went missing or isn't there. You know, sometimes it's almost like [my child] passed away because I don't see them anymore. There's somebody else there.

Participant P5 indicated that,

> I thought he was going to do all the things his sister did, like play with dolls, play makeup, dress up, get married someday, have kids, go to prom. You know, the things you expect from a daughter. One day I had a daughter, and then everything changed, and I had a son.

Participant P6 stated, "[I] feel like all those years were a lie, that something was taken from me. Something [is] lost and can never be [found], but also, never was, and that hurts."

Theme 5: Helplessness or Unsure of What to do

Participants reported experiencing helplessness in their situation. One participant discussed feeling like life has it out for them. Another participant wondered why this was happening to them and their family. One participant expressed feeling helpless because he was unsure of how to help his child through the challenges that accompany a transition:

Participant P1 informed me that, "Sometimes I have a nervous breakdown. I do not wish death upon my child, but why did this have to happen [to] my family?"

Participant P2 stated,

> Sometimes you feel like life has it out for you. Like nothing can go right for you. Like, you must have done something wrong. Like you don't know if God is real or not, but if God is real, you must [have] pissed him off because now he's coming after you.

Participant P3 indicated,

> Girls think about their wedding day and guys don't. Well, maybe guys don't think about their wedding day when they're little boys, but they do start thinking about their son's wedding someday. Now you know, [it] is either going to be non-existent or just look different and that's tough.

Participant P4 reported,

> I guess it just feels odd sometimes when you talk about how they were as a child and [what] her birth gender was. And now it's more of a male coming out of this. The person that used to be a female in your head, you have you struggle with accepting it or figuring it out.

Participant P5 told me that,

> When all of this started, I cried. I didn't know how to help him or what to do for him. [I felt] hopelessness and not knowing how to help or what to do. I felt sad a lot and I know he felt sad, too. I know he was feeling lonely, and I felt like I could not help him. I felt like I wasn't doing enough or should have done more.

Theme 6: Acceptance of Their New Reality

Participants reported experiencing acceptance as it relates to their child's transition and their new reality. One participant discussed coming to the realization that

their love for their child has not changed. Another participant explained that it did not do them any good to hold onto anger or ill feelings, because doing so did not change the reality:

Participant P2 stated,

> Now I accept that this is how he has always felt. I accept that now. Even though maybe certain parts of us died at that time, there's still life that can be found and had and love can be given. My little boy had strength and now my little girl has strength, and I admire that. So that's one thing that is still there. Just in a different way and a way I never would have known at one time [or] understood at one time. I've woken up just a little bit and I'm a better person for it. My life isn't easier. But maybe it’s better.

Participant P3 told me that “I knew that I could practice my faith and love my kid and not have one thing conflict with the other, because I wasn't going to make that choice.”

Participant P4 shared,

> But now [I] see the social transitioning happening. I guess [I’m] moving towards acceptance. I guess you could be angry about it or in denial about it forever, but it doesn't really help you that much and it's not going to help your child that much to remain that way. So, I guess with all of your kids, you're going to want to support them to the maximum extent that you're able to.

Participant P6 reported, “Love is what remains. I love [my child]. I don't have to understand who they are or even what they become to love [my child].”

Theme 7: Fear of the Unknown

Participants reported experiencing fear as it relates to how they would be perceived by others and how their child would be treated by others. One participant discussed being fearful that their child would die by suicide.

Participant P3 indicated that,

> A part of me dreaded speaking to other people about what was going on and the life of my son, even though I was beginning to understand my son was my daughter. I still have to accept that there's some prejudice in me. [Some] things that I don't understand.

Participant P5 revealed that,

> I was afraid he would kill himself because he was so unhappy, and people were so mean. I didn't want him to know I was struggling because I wanted to be strong for him, but it was tearing me apart inside.

General Narrative

Common themes were identified as shock and/or denial, a sense of grief and/or loss, feelings of helplessness, acceptance, fear, internal conflict, and feelings of failure. All of the participants reported experiencing shock and/or denial, internal conflict, and feelings of failure. Participants disclosed that they did not feel prepared to navigate the challenges that came with their child’s transition. Participants felt as though they did not see this coming or that they did not expect this to happen to their child.

Denial was related to the idea that this cannot be real or that this is a phase that the child will grow out of. As a part of the denial stage, some participants questioned

whether their child was gay rather than transgender. Participants discussed feeling like they failed as a parent in some way as a result of their child's revelation. It was common for participants to question whether they did something wrong or should have done something differently in their child rearing. One participant remarked that had he been tougher, his child may not have turned out this way.

Most of the participants reported experiencing feelings of helplessness and feelings of grief/loss. Participants expressed concerns that they did not know how to help their child through this experience. They felt helpless knowing that they did not have the experience or the resources to offer their child. Participants also felt helpless because they could not change the situation or the outcome. Most of the participants reported feeling like they no longer knew who their child was. Some also questioned whether they ever knew their child. There was discussion surrounding the idea that participants were grieving hopes and dreams they had for their child's future that may no longer come to be (e.g., wearing a wedding dress, having children).

Most of the participants reported experiencing feelings of acceptance and some participants reported experiencing feelings of fear. Feelings of fear stemmed from concerns that their child would be bullied or assaulted as a result of their gender identity, fears that their child will not fit in or be able to maintain friendships or relationships, and the fear of what others will think of their child or of them as parents. One participant expressed the fear that his child would die by suicide. Despite being fearful, most participants also reported that they were able to come to some level of acceptance. Primarily, acceptance came from the recognition that the participants still loved their

children, regardless of their gender identity. Participants recognized that holding onto ill feelings or bitterness did not change the reality of the situation.

General Structure

Parents of transgender children report experiencing shock and/or denial, internal conflict, and feelings of failure. Some do not feel prepared to navigate the challenges that come with their child's transition. They feel as though they do not see this coming or that they do not expect this to happen to their child.

Denial was related to the idea that this cannot be real or that this is a phase that the child will grow out of. As a part of the denial stage, parents question their child's sexuality. Parents feel like they failed as a parent in some way as a result of their child's transition. It is common for them to question whether they did something wrong or should have done something differently in their child rearing.

Parents experience feelings of helplessness and feelings of grief/loss. They do not know how to help their child through this experience. They feel helpless knowing that they may not have the experience or the resources to offer their child. Parents also feel helpless because they cannot change their child's situation or the outcome. Most parents report feeling like they no longer know who their child is. Parents may grieve hopes and dreams they had for their child's future that may no longer come to be (e.g., wearing a wedding dress, having children).

Parents experience feelings of acceptance and feelings of fear. Feelings of fear stem from concerns that their child will be bullied or assaulted as a result of their gender identity. Parents also fear that their child will not fit in or be able to maintain friendships

or relationships. Additionally, they fear what others will think of their child or of them as parents. Despite being fearful, parents can reach a level of acceptance. Primarily, acceptance comes from the recognition that they still love their child, regardless of the child's gender identity. Parents recognize that holding onto ill feelings or bitterness does not change the reality of their situation.

Phenomenological Analysis

In the realm of existential philosophy, the concept of *Dasein* holds a central place. Coined by the German philosopher Martin Heidegger, *Dasein* refers to the fundamental nature of human existence, emphasizing our unique ability to experience and interpret the world. It encompasses the complex interplay between our individuality, our existence in the world, and our engagement with the broader fabric of human existence.

While *Dasein* offers a profound lens through which we can explore the depths of human experience, it is during times of unimaginable pain and loss that its true significance becomes palpable. The transition of a child often feels like a loss to parents and that loss strikes at the core of their being as it profoundly challenges their understanding of themselves, their world, and their place within it. It plunges many parents into a state of existential anguish, where the very foundations of their existence may tremble. They may feel like they failed as a parent. They may feel helpless or unsure of what to do. Parents may have difficulty accepting their new reality or they fear the unknown. It is not uncommon for parents to feel a sense of shock and loss as they grapple with their child's transition, as this can be a transformative process, which can trigger various emotions and internal struggles.

When a parent experiences the perceived loss of a child, the world as they once knew it collapses. In an instant, the future they had envisioned for their child is shattered. Some parents may struggle with accepting and embracing their child's identity due to fear of judgment, rejection, or loss of relationships. Parents may also begin to question their deeply ingrained beliefs about gender and society, which can lead them to feel both a sense of cognitive dissonance and self-reflection. It is in this crucible of pain that *Dasein* assumes its full significance, as it demands an examination of the self and the nature of existence. *Dasein* invites parents of transgender children to confront the stark reality of their mortality and the transient nature of life itself. The transition of a child abruptly thrusts parents into this confrontation, forcing them to grapple with the fragility of their existence and the impermanence of those they hold dear. It invites parents to reflect upon the depths of their love and the profound impact their children have on their lives, even in their perceived absence.

In the face of such loss, *Dasein* compels parents to navigate the difficult terrain of grief and find meaning amid the pain. It prompts parents to ask questions that are both haunting and essential: Who am I in this new reality? How do I make sense of the world? While these questions may not have immediate answers, the process of seeking them can become a source of healing and growth for parents of transgender children. *Dasein* invites parents of transgender children to engage authentically with their grief, to embrace the depth of their emotions, and to give themselves permission to mourn fully. It reminds them that amidst the anguish, they still possess the capacity to find moments of beauty, connection, and love.

Dasein may encourage parents to reach out for support, to lean on their loved ones, and to seek solace in the shared experiences of others. It beckons them to discover the resilience within themselves, to adapt to their new reality, and to redefine their sense of purpose and meaning as a parent. It reminds them that while the pain of loss may never fully subside, they can learn to carry it and come to accept it.

Ultimately, *Dasein* teaches us that even in the face of the darkest moments, we are still alive, still capable of experiencing the richness of human existence. It reminds us that the transition of a child is not the end of our own journey but rather an invitation to forge a new path, one that embraces the complexity of grief and the power of resilience.

Dasein beckons us to confront the profound questions of existence, reminding us that our capacity to experience love, connection, and meaning endures even in the face of a perceived loss. It guides us towards a new understanding of ourselves, our place in the world, and the enduring bond we share with the child.

Mitsein is also a concept introduced by the philosopher Martin Heidegger, referring to the fundamental mode of human existence as being-with-others. It emphasizes the idea that our existence is fundamentally intertwined with others, and that our relationships with others play a crucial role in shaping our identity and understanding of the world.

In the context of *Mitsein*, the perceived loss of a child disrupts the fundamental mode of being with others. Parents may feel a profound sense of isolation and disconnection from others who have not experienced the same kind of loss. They may

also find it challenging to engage in everyday social interactions or activities that remind them of their perceived loss.

Moreover, the feeling of losing a child can impact the parents' identity and self-understanding. They may struggle with questions of meaning and purpose, and their perspective on life may be profoundly altered. The pain associated with this sense of loss can be overwhelming and can lead to a range of emotional, psychological, and even physical challenges for the parents.

Evidence of Trustworthiness

I transcribed each interview and implemented the hermeneutic approach of analysis. Reoccurring inferences and patterns were identified. This process gained momentum as more participant responses showed similarities (Choy, 2014). As mentioned above, seven themes emerged: shock and/or denial, a sense of grief and/or loss, feelings of helplessness, acceptance, fear, internal conflict and/or an internal sense of uneasiness, feelings of failure (e.g., questioning oneself, feeling like they did something wrong, questioning if they should have done something differently). These themes can inform me of the parental experience during a child’s gender transition and whether or not it can be generalized to the greater population.

My strategies included an ongoing reflection on my own bias, an ongoing assessment of the applicability of my methods, and thorough record keeping (Lawrence, 2015). Participant accounts were offered verbatim so that findings can be supported and the reasoning behind my interpretation can be understood (Lawrence, 2015).

During my analysis of the data, I used a journal to document my assumptions, experiences, and interpretations of the studied phenomenon. This allowed for my personal bias to be identified and for revisions to be made as a result of recognizing these existing biases. I also utilized member checking, which allowed participants who provided the information the opportunity to review the transcripts for accuracy. The accuracy of the results is not dependent on whether participants agreed with the results or not. This study asked participants to confirm the accuracy of the transcripts. Their view of the interpretation was not a part of the inquiry.

Similar insights found among participants with similar situations do not equate with the sameness of experience. Generalization of findings and results should be avoided, while facets such as setting, experiences, and participants existing as individuals should be considered. Still, similarities in experience can offer insight to others in like situations. Counselors can reference these experiences when working with parents of transgender children.

Replication of this study can be achieved by following the detailed audit trail outlined in Chapter 3. The dependability of this research and its results is maintained through the thorough description of the research process itself. Equivalent findings should result if this research's st8eps are repeated in a similar context with the same phenomenon and inclusion/exclusion criteria.

Summary

Transgender children face stigmas and trials from familial and societal sources, making it beneficial for them to receive parental support (Hillder & Torg, 2019).

However, in order to offer this support, parents of transgender children should be equipped with appropriate resources and help. Parents also need to better understand the needs of their transgender child while coping with the reality of their own experiences and emotions. A lack of professional support cannot only harm the parent/child relationship but also impairs the child's growth into adulthood (Miller, 2020). When counselors offer support to parents of transgender children, parents can in turn better support their child while also learning how to understand their own experiences.

It is with this intent that this hermeneutic phenomenological study was undertaken. Once the experiences of parents of transgender children have been placed into a suitable framework, the needs of these parents and the role they can play in their child's development can be placed into proper context. An exploration of this framework was embarked upon via interviews of parents of transgender children which focus on the experiences of the transition. The findings of this research recognized common experiences among the interviewees including shock and/or denial, a sense of grief and/or loss, feelings of helplessness, a8cceptance, fear, internal conflict and/or an internal sense of uneasiness, and/or feelings of failure. Units of meaning were then created to better analyze the gathered data.

Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

Introduction

The purpose of the hermeneutic phenomenological study was to understand and provide context to the experiences of parents who have a transgender child. Data for this hermeneutic phenomenological study was gathered by interviewing parents of transgender children. I examined the views of parents who have had a transgender child as I attempted to shed light on the essence of this parental experience (Neubauer et al., 2019). I implemented semi structured interviews as my method for gathering information (Jamshed, 2014). The goal of my inquiry was to better understand the experience of parents who have a transgender child. Individual interviews were conducted through the use of Zoom, a video-conferencing platform.

Based on the information gathered, common themes identified were as follows: shock and/or denial, a sense of grief and/or loss, feelings of helplessness, acceptance, fear, internal conflict and/or an internal sense of uneasiness, feelings of failure (e.g., questioning oneself, feeling like they did something wrong, questioning if they should have done something differently). All participants reported feelings of shock denial, internal conflict, and feelings of failure. Five of six participants reported feelings of helplessness and feelings of grief/loss. Four participants reported feelings of acceptance and two participants reported feelings of fear.

Interpretation of Findings

Many changes impact the lives of transgender children and their families as these children transition to their authentic gender identity. Families who experience these

changes go through adjustments as they acknowledge new feelings surrounding this transition. These new feelings are often akin to loss or grief, and the term *ambiguous loss* is commonly used to explain these unresolved forms of grief.

Though an emotional response to a child's gender transition is a common emotional experience for a parent to have, the importance of how to manage such a feeling cannot be understated. When analyzing the results of this study, seven themes emerged which include: shock/denial, grief/loss, helplessness, acceptance, fear, internal conflict, and feelings of failure. Gender identity is a lived reality which is experienced at a personal level, making it erroneous to treat the gender transition procedure as a generalizable process. Elements of the transitioning process are personal to the individuals experiencing it, resulting in various emotions experienced by both the transitioning child and their parents. Though a unique experience, there exist some commonalities often reported among transgender children and their families, including feelings of loss and grief.

These observed patterns of grief have been reflective of the five stages of grief model, and at times have been identical to it. Through her 1969 book entitled *On Death and Dying*, Swiss psychiatrist Kubler-Ross introduced her five stages of grief model (Kubler-Ross,1993). This model was rooted in her work with terminally ill patients. According to Kubler-Ross, the five stages begin with denial and isolation. This is soon followed by anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance (Kubler-Ross, 1993). This list should not be misleading however, as the stages are not linear. It is also important to note that not all individuals experience each stage. In relation to this study, a child's gender

transition can also bring about these feelings. This study, like others, recognized how feelings of loss was a common experience for parents when being faced with the transgender identity of a child.

Dialogue with the Literature

During my analysis of the data, seven themes emerged. These themes parallel similar themes from my review of the literature. There is an emphasis placed on societal and familial gender norms and identity. The emergence of a child's authentic gender identity is accompanied by several changes for the child and their parent(s). One possible experience for the parents is a sense of loss as the relationship with the child they thought they knew has changed. Radical alteration in a child's gender identity can even convey a sense that the identity who was once known to the parent has now passed away. Grief is a common response to this ending relationship and can lead to other unwanted emotions such as guilt and shame experienced by parents of a transgender child.

Influence of Gender Norms on Identity

The revelation of a child's gender non-conformity can easily cause upheaval in how parents relate to their children and understand them, drastically altering relationships (Wahlig, 2015). Parents feel a sense of loss as hopes they had for their child no longer align with the child's authentic identity, and as the child's physical appearance changes. The child's new role in the family alters relations on multiple levels, and parents are often uncertain of how to support their child or even deal with their own emotional responses. My study also supports Wahlig's research in that I also found that parents of transgender

children experience a sense of helplessness. Most parents that participated in my study reported feeling unsure of how to help or support their child.

Societal and Familial Influences

The impact of culture on how an individual's assigned gender affects the individual's expectations, life goals, relationships, and roles is a key point for Wahlig (2015). This influence originates for the individual in the family unit, where expectations and roles are applied with assigned gender-centric designations such as father, mother, son, and daughter. Parental hopes, dreams, and expectations for their children, as well as how they relate to individual children, is gender centric (Wahlig, 2015). A child's transgender transition initiates changes and endings which lead to loss and confusion for parents, resulting in grief (Testoni & Pinducciu, 2019). Wahlig's focus on the sense of confusion parents undergo when encountered by the authentic gender identity of their child is demonstrated as being a response to the change in a family dynamic which previously was dictated by adherence to society's-imposed gender roles.

Participants in my study expressed feelings of grief and loss. For example, some participants spoke about expectations that they had for their child prior to their transition. One parent, P3, explained that "I don't know my own kid, as if my own kid maybe went missing or isn't there. You know, sometimes it's almost like [redacted] passed away. Because I don't see them really anymore. There's somebody else there." Another parent, P6, went on to say that "…make me feel like all those years were a lie. And that something was taken from me. Something lost and can never be. But also, that never was. And that hurts."

Emotional Experiences of Parents

Grief results when something or someone which was loved ceases to exist or is lost (McGuire et al., 2016). Such emotions should not be limited to the death of a loved one. The inability to attain one's dreams can result in grief, as well as a time of transition to something new. Grief is a common part of human experience as various factors can lead to loss (Martello-Gill, 2019; McGuire et al., 2016). Grief can open doors to other emotions. For example, shame and guilt are commonly felt by parents of transitioning children (Norwood, 2013).

In a similar way, parents in my study reported feeling shock and denial, internal conflict, feelings of failure, and fear. One participant described their explained that "It's difficult because, you know, you have a son and then you don't, and you interpret things. That I'm coming to terms with, things I was hoping from my son that's now not going to happen because I guess I, I guess they don't have a son. It's still hard for me to understand." Another participant explained that "I'm a man. Yet I find myself crying at times in the corner by myself, thinking, What? What could I have done to prevent this?" All participants expressed feeling like they could have done something different or that they did something wrong in the rearing of their child.

Ambiguous Loss

Wahlig (2015) discussed how parents of transgender children experience ambiguous loss. By this Wahlig means that that the dynamic and relationship which existed before the revelation of the transgender child's authentic identity has now changed so drastically, it feels for parents as if the child no longer exists though the child

is still alive and present. This notion was affirmed by my study, as most of the participants expressed feelings of grief and loss. One participant, P2, explained that “But now I don't have real happy memories to look back to because apparently, they were fake. You know, it's like in a way, it's like everything died. My whole life died.”

Researcher’s Process

The mode of our being is intertwined with how we see the world and vice versa. Each informs the other, creating what *Dasein* saw as a circular hermeneutical structure phenomenology (Neubauer, Witkop, & Varpio, 2019). It is within this structure that our understanding a continuously being transformed by our interpretations, which in turn reshapes our understanding of the world in which we live. *Dasein* structured Heidegger’s hermeneutics in an ontological way when he proposed that meaning is found in an ongoing relational process phenomenology (Neubauer, Witkop, & Varpio, 2019). In doing this, *Dasein* essentially removed propositional truth from the equation of finding meaning. I chose to apply the Five Stages of Grief theory in addition to a hermeneutic perspective because my work with previous parents and families shaped my ideas about the phenomenon I am studying. I had some preconceived knowledge that parents go through some form of grief/loss cycle when their child transitions genders. It was also my belief that this grief/loss cycle for a parent may look and feel similar to the Five Stages of Grief, keeping in mind that not all five stages will be realized by every parent (Kübler-Ross, 1993).

I did experience some surprises in the results. Prior to completing the interviews, I expected more, if not all, parents to express a level of fear regarding their child’s future

and how their child's transition might impact their life. However, only some of participants reported feelings of fear. Whereas many participants reported reaching some level of acceptance regarding their child's gender transition. This was surprising to me as I expected acceptance to be the least reported theme by parents.

Bias was something that I monitored throughout the study. Being that I had some preconceived notions and ideas regarding the grief/loss cycle, I had to be careful not to impose my ideas or opinions during the interview. A couple of times, parents asked for my opinion and my thoughts regarding their child's transition. I was not expecting this, so I had not pre-planned a response for this. Being that I had a preconceived idea that fewer parents would reach a level of acceptance, I had to review my interview questions and follow up responses to ensure that they were not leading in any way and that they did not prompt for certain types of responses. Additionally, there were times during the interviews when some participants became visibly emotional. As a result, I had to find a way to balance being empathetic and compassionate, while still focusing on the purpose of the interview and avoiding allowing the interview to become a counseling session.

Participants' Experiences

All these participants were impacted by changes in their lives triggered by the transition of their transgender child. Some participants reported that they had not reached a level of acceptance regarding their child's transition. All participants reported some level of internal conflict and feelings of failure regarding their child's transition. During the interview process, some of the participants reported that they had preconceived ideas about their child's future prior to the child's gender transition. For example, P3 shared

“Oh you know, girls think about their wedding day and guys don't. Well, maybe guys don't think about their wedding day when they're little boys, but they do start thinking about their son's wedding someday. From the very beginning of their wedding and being in football and doing all kinds of things that suddenly, you know, is either going to be non-existent or just look different.” In the interview, the participant later reported that “…I still have to accept that there's some prejudice in me. Things that I don't understand.” All participants reported some level of having to adjust their own views of what their child’s life should look like.

P6 explained “I was stunned.” “They’re not [my] little girl anymore. And according to [my child], never was. And to make me feel like all those years were a lie. And that something was taken from me. Something lost and can never be. But also, that never was. And that hurts.” “I know a man is not supposed to be crying, but I did much. Much crying.” “I am still confused.” “But now I see that. [my child] never really was. But even if [my child] never really was I miss [them]. “Love is what remains. I love [my child]. I don't have to understand who they are or even what they become to love [them].”

Assumptions

As I discussed in Chapter 1, I made several assumptions through the course of executing this study. My primary assumption was that parents of transgender children experience a sense of loss when their child undergoes a gender transition. This assumption was validated as participants (parents of transgender children) discussed feelings of grief/loss in their interviews. In addition, other related themes emerged: shock

and/or denial, feelings of helplessness, acceptance, fear, internal conflict and/or an internal sense of uneasiness, and feelings of failure.

Interpretation of Findings

This study extends knowledge to the counseling field because it provides context to the experiences of parents whose children have a transgender child. By interviewing parents of transgender children. I explored the ways in which parents of transgender children experience their child's transition. As a result of this study, counselors may have a better understanding of the parents' experiences regarding the transition of their child. Increased knowledge in this area will help counselors better support parents of transgender children. This is necessary because transgender identities are still widely misunderstood in society, even by some professionals, though increased attention for this community has been seeing an increase in clinical competence.

This research will help to address gaps in current literature as this topic scarcely exists in the literature. This study enforces previous findings while also adding new insight. Counselors and other healthcare professionals will have a better understanding of the parents' experiences regarding the transition of their child due to this research. The results of this study will offer more knowledge in this area, allowing for counselors to be better equipped when providing support to these parents of transitioning children.

In relation to a previous study by Wahlig (2015), the term "ambiguous loss" is discussed within the concept of this current study. The conclusions of this current study suggest that loss is experienced and that parents are uncertain of how to relate to their children, though they want to support them and help them to be successful.

Limitations

Limitations accompany all human subjects, and this in turn has an impact on the research which is performed. For this study, the number of participants was small (six) and may not speak to a wider population of people. Another recognized limitation is that there were time restraints related to my availability or the availability of the participants. As a result, I was not always able to delve into deeper inquiry regarding this phenomenon. In addition, for two of the participants, English was not their first language. Due to this, questions had to be re-phrased or explained so that these participants could better ascertain what was being asked.

Recommendations for Future Research

Further research on this topic would be useful in illuminating how religious beliefs and culture play a role in a parent's experience of their child's gender transition. Additionally, further research on this topic is needed to determine which treatment modalities are most effective when working with parents of transgender children, especially as they relate to common themes which emerged such as feelings of failure, internal conflict, and shock/denial. Being that the research sample size was small, it would be beneficial to collect data from a larger sample pool across different geographical locations and different ethnicities to augment the depth and strengths of this study's conclusions.

Implications

There are several implications for the information presented in this study. Many various health challenges face transgender individuals at a percentage and rate far greater

than those experienced by their cisgender peers. Being that the transgender experience counters many existing social norms, these individuals can face minority stress, anxiety and depression. These experiences lead to a higher suicide rate in the transgender community when compared to the general population. Though gender transition can reduce these health issues, it cannot protect transgender population from the stigma, fear, bias and discrimination that the wider community can often impose on the transgender individual. This prejudice has permeated society and has even influenced transgender research outcomes historically. In order to overcome these past wrongs and to find new avenues of meeting the needs of the transgender community, more research is necessary (Cornell University, 2020).

Parents h2ave a difficult task as they work to raise their children to be healthy and participating members of society. Parents of transgender children also desire goodness for their child's growth and future. It is the intent of this study to help parents of transgender children better understand their own experiences so that they may better support and guide their children. Gender is highly influenced by social norms, and these standards can often be a hinderance to the growth of a gender non-conforming child. Parents who are at proper terms with their own feelings and who have access to the proper information can help their transgender children face societal challenges and the emotional responses which stem from these challenges (Human Rights Campaign, 2020).

Summary

Individual interviews were conducted to better understand the experience of parents who have a transgender child. Results demonstrated that there exist some

commonalities often reported among transgender children and their families, including feelings of loss and grief. Recognizing how these feelings were a common experience for parents when being faced with the transgender identity of a child, I chose to apply the Five Stages of Grief theory in addition to a hermeneutic perspective. The findings of this study were not reflective of my preconceived notions, as only some parents reported feelings of fear, while most parents approached their child's transition with some level of acceptance. Yet, all participants reported some level of having to adjust their own views of what their child's life should look like. Also, though the emotion of fear was not reported at the levels I anticipated, my other primary assumption was validated as participants discussed feelings of grief and loss. Providing context to the experiences of parents whose children have a transgender child, this study extends knowledge to the counseling field because it provides counselors with a better understanding of the parents' experiences regarding the transition of their child. This will also help to address gaps in the current literature regarding this topic.

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Appendix A: Interview Questions

- Tell me a little about your child.
- What is your experience of your child's gender identity?
- How has your child's gender transition had an impact on your life?
- How has your child's gender transition had an impact on your relationship with your child?
- What feelings or emotions did your child's transition bring about for you?
- Describe any changes that have occurred in your life since your child's transition (e.g., socially, emotionally, spiritually, financially)?
- Was your initial response to your child's transition reflective of your current experience? If so, how?
- What was your experience of your child's gender identity prior to your child's transition? Has this experience changed or expanded? If so, how?
- Is there anything that you have learned from this experience?

Appendix B: Recruitment Flyer

Interview seeks parents of transgender children

There is a new study about the experiences of parents whose children have transitioned from their assigned birth sex to their authentic gender identity. As a result of this study, counselors may have a better understanding of the parents' experiences regarding the transition of their child. Increased knowledge in this area helps counselors better support these parents. This is necessary because transgender identities are still widely misunderstood in society, even by some professionals, though increased attention for this community has been seeing an increase in clinical competence.

About the study:

- One 60–90-minute Zoom or phone interview that will be audio recorded
- You would receive a $25 Visa gift card as a thank you
- To protect your privacy, the published study would use numerical codes in place of participant names

Volunteers must meet these requirements:

- 18 years old or older
- Biological or adoptive parents of a child who has transitioned to a gender identity which differs from their biological sex at birth. At a minimum, the child must have "socially transitioned." For the purpose of this study, a child is considered to be socially transitioned once the following criteria have been met: the choice to make the transition to the authentic gender is driven by the child's feeling that the birth assigned at sex is not congruent with their own experience of gender, the transition process is preceded by the child's revealing of their authentic gender identity to other individuals, aspects of transition involve changes on the cosmetic, legal and social levels, notwithstanding the implementation of medical interventions, referred pronouns are shared with others and the legal adoption of a new name is possible.
- Fluent in the English language

This interview is part of the doctoral study for Ashley Rosenberg, a Ph.D. student at Walden University. Interviews will take place during December 2022.

To confidentially volunteer, contact the researcher: Ashley Rosenberg
xxxx-xxx-xxxx
xxxx.xxxx@waldenu.edu

Appendix D: Recruitment Email

Interview seeks parents of transgender children

There is a new study about the experiences of parents whose children have transitioned from their assigned birth sex to their authentic gender identity. As a result of this study, counselors may have a better understanding of the parents' experiences regarding the transition of their child. Increased knowledge in this area helps counselors better support these parents. This is necessary because transgender identities are still widely misunderstood in society, even by some professionals, though increased attention for this community has been seeing an increase in clinical competence.

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This interview is part of the doctoral study for Ashley Rosenberg, a Ph.D. student at Walden University. Interviews will take place during December 2022.

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