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# TransGender Kinship: TransForming Family

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## TransGender Kinship: TransForming Family

Dianne Marie Schindler, PhD

University of Connecticut, 2015

This dissertation focuses on the processes of negotiating and redrawing concepts of relatedness, kinship, group membership, and citizenship for transgender people. Examining relationships in the context of family, friendship, group membership, and law, I explore how relationships are defined, challenged, and transformed in the context of gender transition. By conducting structured interviews of transgender people and their family members, and engaging in participant observation in support group meetings, conferences, and social events, I was able to collect a wide range of data to utilize in my analysis. I sought to understand the ways in which transgender people identify the place of kinship in their own lives. I pay careful attention to the power dynamics that are embedded in relationships, and the ways in which they are transformed during and after gender transition. I argue that as transgender people move from one gender to another, they find themselves in a state of liminality, where familial, social, and legal rights can no longer be claimed or guaranteed, but must be petitioned for instead. This difference between ‘claiming’ rights and ‘petitioning for’ them is the difference between having ones dignity recognized, and having it denied (Osiatynski 2009). This loss of power and dignity has a significant impact on transgender peoples’ well being and how they conceptualize and challenge hegemonic notions of transgender identity. The ways in which transgender people are portrayed collectively has a significant impact on how individuals conceptualize their own place in the family and in society.

Dianne Marie Schindler – University of Connecticut, 2015

The collective tendency to portray transgender people as ‘outside’ of the family has a negative impact on transgender notions of selfhood and contradicts the lived experience of transgender people. By closely examining the lived experience of kinship connections and social inclusion, I work to expand understandings of kinship, family, friendship, and citizenship in the context of transgender lives.

TransGender Kinship: TransForming Family

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TransGender Kinship: TransForming Family

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## **INTRODUCTION: TRANSGENDER KINSHIP, TRANSFORMING POWER**

This dissertation focuses on the processes of negotiating and redrawing concepts of relatedness, kinship, and group membership for transgender individuals in New England. The term *transgender* is linked to a wide variety of practices and identities. Transgender is defined by anthropologist David Valentine as a term used to “describe someone assigned to one gender who, in one respect or another, does not perform or identify as that gender, and has taken some steps – temporary or permanent – to present in another gender” (2003:26-7). In this broad sense, the term *transgender* has been used to encompass identities as diverse as: cross-dresser, drag-king, drag-queen, transgenderist, FTM (Female to Male), MTF (Male to Female), gender blender, transman, and transwoman (Hines 2007, Valentine 2003). Some have taken issue with the term *transgender*, noting that it implies the desire to move from one binary category to another. Some of these individuals prefer the use of “non-gender” or “genderqueer” to acknowledge their unique experience with a non-binary gender. However, *transgender* has served as an important departure from previous labels that limited gender expression and identity into behaviorally scripted, ill-fitting, and restrictive categories. It is also an important alternative to the pseudo-medical terms, previously used not only to label but also to pathologize gender-variant individuals. (Denny 2006).

*Transgender* has also served as a social and political tool to elicit collective mobilization since the 1990’s; and it has been used in attempts to obtain social and political rights for gender minorities in the United States (Califia 2003, Valentine 2003). Though it is not without contestation, *transgender* has become a widely utilized term to represent the experience of transitioning from one gender identity to another. I use the term *transgender* throughout my dissertation because it was the term of reference most used by participants in my research. It

served as the term under which they created and participated in group events. While transgender people may indeed represent a vast array of gender identities and presentations, the process of moving from one gender identity to another served to structure commonality in their experiences while navigating familial and social ties. For the people in my study, and the larger body of literature on transgender experiences within the context of families and communities (Hines 2007, Levi 2012), there was a significant shift in relationship structures and relational power equilibriums upon the disclosure of one's transgender identity. This power differential was evident in a variety of social and legal spheres, and it will be explored in depth in the following chapters.

In the most simple of terms, kinship is the symbolic construction of relatedness. While we often conceptualize kinship as a system with discretely bounded and static categories for analysis, the lived experience of relatedness is much more complex and dynamic (Freeman 2007, Gittins 2010, Hayden 1995, Lenke 2009, Strathern 2005). Studied over time, kinship can be viewed as a process in which relatives can be added or subtracted within changing concepts of how relatedness itself is reckoned (Carsten 2004, Strathern 2005). Our identities are bound up in the titles and roles we are given or take on as "relatives". In the United States, kinship labels are distributed along generational and gendered lines; and while individuals are unquestionably able to cross over generationally (moving from niece to aunt, or daughter to mother), the same flexibility is not given to crossing gendered categories. However, these static categories are challenged and renegotiated by individuals who come to identify as transgender. The negotiation processes initiated and experienced by transgender persons, as they cross gendered kinship boundaries, highlight the relationships amongst gender, kinship and identity. My research sought to understand the ways in which transgender people identify the place of kinship in their

own lives, demonstrating how kinship both shapes and is shaped by the understandings and negotiations of the individuals it encompasses. By exploring the impacts of gender transition on kinship categories and the relationships they define, I was able to examine the interaction of gender, family, kinship and identity as one or more of these categories shifted and transformed.

Marilyn Strathern (1992) has written extensively on English kinship and changing cultural conceptions of “nature” in the face of rapidly advancing reproductive technologies that invite consideration of the nature of kinship as a reflection of biological ties. She asserts that the biological foundation of kinship cannot be taken for granted and challenges the “substance / code” or biogenetic (Schneider 1980) grounding of Euro-American kinship systems, problematizing the nature/culture binary that has served as the foundation of kinship analysis in anthropological thought. Research on transgender kinship sheds new light onto the nature/culture gender divide. Just as technology is rapidly transforming our understanding of biology and reproduction, it is also challenging the biological grounding of gender. As individuals use medical technologies and social transformations to move from one gender category to another, the notion of gender as rooted in nature is contested - as is the culturally held notion that kinship is based on stable, “natural”, and binary gender divisions. Strathern asserts that in the relationship between nature and kinship, “the family dissolves but the kinship remains” (2005:26). My research turns this question around by asking: what happens when the kinship terms dissolve but the family remains?

While some may argue that kinship no longer plays a central role in the daily lives of Americans, notions of relatedness, family, and group identity are most often discussed using the rhetoric of kinship. Individuals situate themselves within a kinship network for intimacy and care. Some of

my research questions were: how do transgender people use their kinship networks? Do they reproduce hegemonic notions of kinship, or do they break away and utilize them in new ways? Through the theoretical framework of power differentials and the analysis of how power is distributed in relationships, I examined what happens to kin networks and relationships when an individual transitions from one gender to another. Power in this context is best understood as that outlined by Foucault (1980) in his description of “diffuse power”, where power relations take multiple forms and exist in multiple contexts: familial, institutional, and administrative. Foucault’s notion of ‘diffuse power’ posits that power is not wielded in an all encompassing battle between oppressor and oppressed but within the more subtle daily interactions that structure lives and routines. Which kin relationships are recontextualized during and after gender transition, and how? Which relationships are more impacted by shifts in power hierarchies, and why? How do the relationships that are described and defined by kin terms transform? How do some relationships come to be embedded with social and emotional power, and how are these relationships understood in terms of kinship? More broadly, I examine how gender identity impacts and is impacted by one’s place in a reconstituted kinship network. How can turning attention to the emotional ties of kinship inform our understanding of transgender life and gender identity in the society at large? It is important to understand how these reconstituted families are viewed by the society at large and how these collective conceptions of family, kinship and relatedness impact families through the implementation of family law and public policy.

Gender has been central to the way in which kinship has been constructed, defined and situated within American society (Carrington 2010, Freeman 2007, Gittins 2010, Rapp 2000). A privileging of kinship forms, that follow the expectations of reproduction and gender, are

informally embedded in social relations and formally reflected in legal systems. In an examination of American adoption practices, Judith Modell (1994) points out that the law constructs kinship by mirroring biology, conforming to hegemonic notions of what “counts” as kinship. Destabilizing the biogenetic base of kinship strips the foundational power from the binary view of “real” versus “chosen” families. This foundational power, however, still has a strong pull on how individuals conceptualize and rank various social relationships. Attempts to relegate some families to fictive status, because they are formed outside of the hegemonic code of substance and law, have been extensively critiqued as privileging some family forms while stripping others of their authenticity (Butler 2004, Carsten 2000, Freeman 2007, Gittins 2010, Halberstam 2007, Hayden 1995, Lenke 2009, Lewin 1998). Can we truly avoid the trap of classifying kin ties as either “real” or “fictive”? If we are to examine kinship in the context of “lived experiences”, it is important to examine how participants view their relationships in terms of relationality. As we shall see in this dissertation, that abstraction is significantly impacted by individual histories, popular discourse, and legal recognition. Some relationships (almost always those relationships recognized socially and legally as “formal kinship ties”, e.g. mother, father, sister, brother, daughter, son, etc.) are seen as significantly more enduring and hold a greater level of importance in the lives of transgender participants than other relationships (such as those considered friendships and those between group members) which were seen as less permanent and less central to one’s identity .

All relationships, whether they were seen as enduring or temporary, were subject to significant shifts in relations both during and after an individual’s gender transition. My dissertation explores how these emotional ties, which fall under the umbrella of kinship, change as individuals transition from one gender to another. In his analysis of American kinship, David

Schneider's (1980) focus on the symbolic importance of kinship, and the cultural construction of relatedness, marked a distinct shift in how anthropologists examined kinship. In Strathern's (2000) examination of cultural notions of biology and kinship in relation to reproductive technologies, effectively destabilized such grounding of procreation in the "natural" biological arena as the unquestioned and uncontested basis for understanding kinship.

As Carsten argued: "...anthropological analyses of kinship presumed what they should have subjected to analytic scrutiny" (2000:188). In light of transgender experience, we can no longer assume that an individual will retain the same gender identity for the duration of his or her lifetime; and, therefore, we need to understand the effects on the process of kinship when there is a shift in the gendered positions that it contains. My work explores what responses to shifting genders tell us about the role that gender plays in kinship, and the role of kinship in shaping gender roles. By examining the experiential dimensions of kinship for transgender people and their families, my research addresses the question of what kinship identity means to the individuals involved. Those kinship roles are transformed and performed in the context of family. This focus on the experience of kin membership, and the examination of how it impacts and is impacted by identity and law, builds on the foundation laid by Carsten (2000), Godelier (2011), Modell (1994), and Strathern (1992) in their analyses of the social, legal and theoretical implications of changing kinship opportunities and experiences.

As the notions of what constitutes family and relatedness transform in contemporary society, the anthropological analysis of kinship must also expand to accommodate the experiences and realities that such changes entail. As many scholars have asserted (Carsten 2000, Freeman 2007, Strathern 1992), the Western notion of a discrete and bounded nuclear family as the context for

understanding relatedness can no longer be understood as the sole foundation of relatedness in our society. If we are to understand how individuals generate the cultural understandings and meanings that give emotional force to kinship symbols, we must first seek out kinship in all of its forms and manifestations and examine it as a dynamic and interactive process. If we are to keep kinship theory relevant in a society where the borders and boundaries of “nature”, “gender”, and “culture” are being contested and redrawn, we must understand and analyze new meanings given to kinship in contemporary family forms. How are social relationships recast and redrawn in the context of gender transition? What, more importantly, do these reorganizations of kinship terminologies and categories tell us about the social processes that guide our notions of relatedness, family and kinship?

The symbolic and social privileges bestowed upon traditional American kinship relations are reflected in family law. Many state laws equate blood ties to family ties and often regard “fictive” or “chosen” families as invisible within the legal system. Understanding the roles of these new kin ties, however, is essential to shed light on how new relationships can be developed, not through marriage or descent as is typically expected in American kinship, but through emotional bonds and shared identity. Law is often challenged and altered in the face of social and technological innovation. For example, advances in reproductive technology such as surrogacy, artificial insemination, and egg donation caused a shift in how people reckoned “relatedness”, both socially and legally. Technological innovations in hormone therapy and gender reassignment surgery have allowed people to change the gender assigned to them at birth. Such changes, by their very nature, impact how relatedness is defined and shape the collective identity upon which these new bonds rest. I sought to discover whether such new bonds are based upon gender identity, class or ethnicity, and what these alternative connections tell us

about kinship and group creation. I also addressed the individual's understanding of his or her relationships within the law, and what effects that lack of recognition or protection has upon non-traditional family forms.

What we often see unfold as an individual transitions genders is a shift in the homeostasis of power relations at both a micro level and a macro level of analysis. When an individual transitions from one gender to another, the power balance of all relationships is set into upheaval. Relational dynamics change, in ways that are less about changes in specific kinship connections and more about shifts in the power dynamics that are embedded in relationships. The process of "coming out" as transgender entails a handing over of power and an entry into a state of liminality, where the onus is on family members, friends, collective communities and legal institutions to decide if and when to reincorporate the individual under a new gender identity. The transgender person, in this context, hands over the ability to "claim" a position in families, friendships, communities, and within the law. They are left, instead, to request access to those realms of existence that cisgender (non-transgender) individuals take for granted. As we shall see, this has significant consequences on both the empowerment and dignity of transgender people as they navigate gender transition. The ways in which power shifts, and the relational consequences that each shift entails, will differ in each sphere of interaction that we examine. In each of the chapters that follow, I outline and explore the ways in which transgender people endure, navigate, and challenge these power differentials in an attempt to claim relationships, rights, and dignity.

## **Methodology and Ethical Considerations**

Data from which this dissertation draws comes from a combination of participant observation, narrative collection, and semi-structured, in-depth interviews. My initial communication with potential participants was established by attending various seminars and presentations on transgender issues, where I reached out to presenters and attendees and explained the focus of my research. Through these contacts, I gained access to support group meetings where I was able to meet participants and talk about my study. As I began recruiting interview participants, I also attended transgender support group meetings, conferences and social events. Additionally, I joined several online forums where local events and transgender issues were discussed.

Interviews were open to any adult who identified as transgender, or any adult who had a transgender family member. All interview participants resided in Massachusetts or Connecticut, and all were raised in the United States. Because of this, research findings do not point to a representation of transgender people as a whole, nor do they include the perspective of non-Western transgender people. What they do provide is an important perspective into the lived experience of transgender people in a particular space and time, which speaks and contributes to larger conversations and issues for transgender people nationally and internationally.

A total of twenty in-depth interviews were conducted. Participants ranged in age from 25 to 70 years and held a wide variety of occupations (and variable employment). All participants had completed a minimum of high-school level education. Interviews took from 1 to 1.5 hours on average and covered a wide range of topics on kinship, friendship, community and legal recognition. Interviews were designed to elicit narratives that captured the reflections and experiences of respondents, with open-ended questions that allowed for flexibility and in-depth

explanations. In addition to in-depth interviews, I was able to collect fifteen narratives from family members of transpeople (9 parents, 1 aunt, 5 spouses/significant others), which were valuable in providing the perspective of family members during and after an individual's gender transition. Important to note in the narratives of family members is that they were provided by individuals who were, at least to some extent, supportive of their loved ones (since they were collected at support groups and conferences). The reactions of non-supportive family members were recalled by transgender participants but relied on the perspective of the respondent and not the family members. Additionally, I was fortunate that my research topic drew a great deal of interest among support group members and conference attendees, which allowed me to supplement in-depth interview data with additional narratives from transgender people. Attendees were extremely willing to talk about their experiences with family and social connections during and after gender transition. These smaller narratives would serve to reinforce and shape the patterns that I began discovering during my analyses of interview transcripts, and they allowed me to greatly expand the scope and diversity of my initial sample. As I will discuss later in the dissertation, a significant gap in the demographic can be seen in the underrepresentation of people of color. The overwhelming majority of participants in interviews, support groups, and conferences were white.

My own position as a cisgender (non-transgender) researcher affected the findings of my research, since there were very likely questions that I did not ask due to my lack of an "inside" perspective. Alternatively, my distance from transgender identity may have led me to ask questions that a transgender researcher would not see as necessary for clarification.

Additionally, there were some spaces (certain conference workshops and certain support groups) where I was not permitted, since I was not transgender. However, these spaces were the

exception and not the rule, since I found that I was warmly welcomed in the vast majority of transgender spaces and was easily able to develop trust and rapport with the people with whom I worked in my study. In particular, I found a tremendous amount of support from two transwomen who were extremely helpful in helping me gain a “foothold” in support groups and provided valuable access to informational resources.

In her work with transgender people in the UK, Sally Hines (2007) emphasized the “sensitive nature” of research on transgender issues, and urged social scientists to remain vigilant about ethical considerations. The primary ethical consideration of anthropologists working with marginalized populations and identity groups is to avoid misrepresentation. In a world where “transphobia” still has very real and dire consequences - where people can lose their jobs, custody of their children and even their lives, solely on the basis of non-normative gender identity - the stakes for accurate and authentic portrayals of transgender people are undoubtedly high. I took great care to present the concerns and perspectives of transgender people by using their narratives and personal stories while simultaneously protecting their privacy. Pseudonyms were used for all interview excerpts, and identifying details that were not essential to analysis were omitted.

### **A Note on Ethics and Shame**

This focus on the preservation of dignity and the humanization of transgender lives is central, if we are to truly understand the forces that shape the transgender experience. There was a profound moment during my fieldwork, at a break between conference workshops, where I sat and chatted with an individual who identified as a transman. He was highlighting the importance of support groups for the family members of transgender people as they navigated gender

transition. I went to jot something down in my field notes, and he stopped me . He said: “*If you only write one thing in your notebook, write the word ‘Shame’. As transpeople, we live with shame our whole lives, It is the word that sums up the transgender experience*”. This conversation was central to my analysis of the transgender experience, and critical in understanding their relationships as family members, friends and citizens.

Shame is defined as “a painful feeling of humiliation or distress caused by the consciousness of wrong or foolish behavior” (Oxford English Dictionary), and it is listed as synonymous with “dishonor”. Both “shame” and “dishonor” entail a loss of pride or dignity in social interactions. This focus on ‘shame’ as a collective emotion, for transgender people in the context of relationships, points to the need for a recalculation of how gender transition and transgender people are portrayed in our society. If shame is evoked as a reaction to “wrong” behavior, feeling shame at the time of transition points to a conceptualization that crossing gendered boundaries is “wrong” in and of itself. By working to portray transgender lives and relationships in a robust and positive light, anthropologists and anthropological studies can increase images and information that familiarize and subsequently humanize collective conceptualizations of transgender people - and serve, in small part, to brace against the ill effects of skewed power differentials.

### **Structure of the Dissertation**

The opening chapter of this dissertation, *Kinship and Power*, explores the various ways that kinship and relatedness are constructed socially and symbolically in the United States, along with the ways in which gender and gender identities structure relationships and the power hierarchies contained within them. This chapter will deal specifically with familial kinship bonds that are

formally recognized, culturally and legally. The transformations in power dynamics and the subsequent transformations in kinship relations will be explored in the context of various relationships. First, I explore the shifting relationships between transgender participants and their parents, followed by the shifts in relationships between transgender participants and their spouses and children. Because these intimate relationships have significant emotional weight and importance in the lives of transgender people, they also have the greatest power imbalance; and they are, therefore, the greatest sites of power contestation. When an individual revealed his or her gender identity to family members – regardless of which of the three kinship categories were examined - there was a suspension in his/her ability to claim family ties. The moment of “coming out” to family members signified the beginning of a liminal space in which the transperson no longer embodied his/her former kinship status but was not yet recognized as authentically embodying the cross-gender kinship marker. Mostly, transpeople handed power to the cisgender family members at this moment, as they viewed their family members as the ones who would ultimately set the terms of the new relationships. The transperson could petition family members to accept the new gendered and relational identity, but they could not make claims to the title and roles without the consent and cooperation of fellow kin. What happened after these transfers of power greatly varied from situation to situation and with individual histories and family dynamics. An important thing to note, however: after an individual revealed his or her identity to family members, the shift in kinship categories and interpersonal relationships played a secondary role to the shift in power relations that role contained. A shift in the gendered base of kin relationships led to an exposure of the power dynamics that are embedded in familial relationships; and, as Yanagisako argues, “...inequality and hierarchy come already embedded in symbolic systems” (1995: ix). The symbols and practices of a

kinship system distribute and naturalize power hierarchies, often along gender lines. Rayna Rapp writes: “Euro-American family life defines the intersection of gender and generation. It provides a language linking sex and age groups in patterns of hierarchy and dependence, authority, and obedience, spoken in the etiquette of generosity and responsibility” (1987:124). When an individual disrupts the gendered foundation upon which these hierarchies rest, the power balance of relationships upsets the status quo. What we see in the relationships among kin, at the point of gender transition, is less change of relationships and more change of power balances that are rooted in the hegemonic notion that formally recognized kinship ties are somehow more “authentic” and “enduring” than relationships forged through other kinds of interactions.

Chapter Two, *Like Family To Me*, explores friendship connections in the context of “extra-kin” regimes of care, and the role that friendships play in the daily lives of transpeople. Relationships classified by participants as “friendships” often entail informal acts of kindness, care, and resource sharing that are as frequent as (if not more frequent than) care and intimacy practices found between formally recognized, familial kinsmen. In terms of reimagining kinship as rooted in “shared experience” (Sahlins 2013) instead of biology and law, we could easily envision the shared triumphs and adversities shared by transpeople and their friends as a foundation on which to build new kin relationships. There was also a significant absence of power differentials in these relationships, both during and after gender transition. However, ‘friends’ and ‘kin’ were often kept strictly separate in discussions. Whenever a respondent was making a point to show affinity for friends, the phrase “*like family*” was uttered frequently. This term, “like family”, is certainly loaded. It is bringing friends from support groups, conferences and meetings into the fold of affinity that is normally reserved for kin relations, yet simultaneously keeps those friendships distinctly bounded in the cognitive realm of “like”. Certainly, the norms that

structure formal kinship relations in the United States are the result of repeated practices that have led to norms of privileging heterosexual gender and families that are anchored socially and legally. The transgender people I worked with tended to privilege “family” over “friendship” and consciously avoided conflation of the two. I argue that this points to important perspectives on empowerment and agency. As Chapter Two later explains, there is a tendency in both popular and academic discourses to situate transpeople as outside the fold of formally recognized kinship and family ties. By emphasizing their connection to natal families and avoiding association with what has been come to be termed “fictive kin” or “intentional families” (Muraco 2006, Weston 1991), transpeople are exercising their agency to be portrayed on their own terms. Ties forged outside of traditionally recognized kin relationships are seen by individuals (as well as policy makers and public opinion) as less stable and less enduring. The problem with this cycle, however, is that it becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. Relationships, forged outside of the socially and legally mitigated spheres of marriage and descent, lack rights and recognition granted to married couples and relatives. This lack of rights leads to insecurity and, perhaps eventually, to the very instability that is expected. Respondents I spoke with found friendship and community ties to be important aspects of their identity and well being, but they minimized these relationships in their narratives. Whether examining family legislation or popular media, the power of family and marriage reinforces and strengthens the belief that “blood is thicker than water”, and kinship ties are enduring and unbreakable (even when, time and time again, they prove that they are neither).

Chapter Three, *Transgender Connections*, moves on to the connections forged by transgender people through their association with other transgender people. The first section, “Troubling Membership”, discusses the diversity of the collective of people who are placed under the banner

of transgender. Here, grounded in Valentine's notion of representational violence, I explore the consequences of being collectively categorized based on a single dimension of one's identity (in this case, nonnormative gender practices) and the social and emotional consequences of such narrow identifications. Many political action groups seeking social and political recognition portray transgender lives as rooted in violence and suffering. This portrayal has significant consequences on the empowerment and dignity of transgender people, who find such portrayals as essentializing and inaccurate. In this chapter, I shed light on how transgender participants view themselves and their connections with other transgender people on both a macro and micro level. I examine how support groups and social justice movements impact an individual's perception of their identity and worth. The majority of participants in my research were often reluctant to identify as a "full" member of the transgender "community" (the word participants used to describe the groups they were a part of). Most people felt that they were too complex and multifaceted to fit into hegemonic notions of transgender identity boxes. Transgender respondents often directly addressed the feeling of power imbalances that structured a shared notion of who was "really" transgender. They critiqued narrow definitions set by group and political leaders; and they often made attempts to distinguish between the support they received through small-scale community meetings and the constriction they felt in the pressure to conform, set by larger political and national discourses. Valentine's (2007) discussion of transgender community touches upon this tension between collective imagery and lived experience under the banner of "transgender" as he states that community is never a natural fact, but is instead a process that happens through the exercise of agency and power. Power differentials concerning who had the right to set the terms of "membership" were often contrasted with smaller transgender collectives that were based on common interests and affinity.

These relationships foreground the notion of voluntary associations, defined by social engagement, that exist primarily through the interaction of group members. Transgender people I spoke with often listed these relationships as the most empowering and important form of communal interaction. They were hesitant to classify these informal associations as “transgender groups”, and preferred to label them as “friendships”. I also pay close attention to who is included as a “member” of the various transgender organizations, and who is left out of the discourse altogether. The processes of inclusion and exclusion are grounded in the intersection of several factors, including but not limited to: location, class, race, and gender expression.

When I first set out to examine collective notions of transgender identity and the groups that transgender people created, I wondered whether relationships forged with other transgender people were viewed as substitutes for lost kin connections. What I discovered upon exploring concepts of transgender identity and transgender connections with participants in interviews, meetings and workshops was that not only did transgender associations fail to replace lost kin ties, but these connections were often seen as the binary opposite of family in transgender lives.

Finally, Chapter Four, *The Family in Context: Relationships, Law, and Human Rights*, examines the relationship between kinship, families, and legal recognition and the impact legal recognition of transgender rights has on empowerment and dignity for transgender people and their families. Upon initial analysis, discussions on legal rights in the context of family did not seem to be a major focus for transgender respondents. Discussions of legal rights in various venues were often oriented toward medical insurance claims and employment legislation. Upon deeper examination, it became clear that the silence on transgender family rights was indicative of the exclusion of transgender people from the context of family in the popular, political, and legal realms. Transpeople were often portrayed as individuals with medical and economic concerns,

rather than familial concerns. Often, transgender people were assumed to exist in *contrast* to family life rather than situated *within* family life. This is significant, because the recognition of an individual as a member of a family group plays an important role in humanizing the transgender person and his or her experiences. The emotional power and weight of kinship, and the privilege of being viewed within the context of family, cannot be minimized. The power of kinship symbolism, and the instant connections one can make with terms like “mother”, “father”, “daughter”, and “son”, are not only cognitively satisfying but also carry significant moral and humanizing weight. To be seen as a family member, and to have one’s family and rights to family recognized by the legal system, are both integral to the empowerment and dignity of the individual. Invisibility and silence on transgender rights within the law lead to a power vacuum where rights are surrendered and left to the gray area of legal interpretation, which is too often impacted by social prejudices against transpeople. Law serves to shape discourse, provide protections, and serve as a vehicle for violence in the context of transgender lives and experiences. Legislation also helps to craft the discourse and imagery of citizenship and morality. Legal discourse frames understandings of the “good citizen” and “bad citizen” and validates (or discredits) specific unions and family forms. As Strathern suggests: “The law sets up protocols and boundaries that direct people’s actions, and deploys categorical or conceptual relations” (2005:85). In Chapter Four, I explore legal cases that exemplify the dangers of non-recognition and the potentials and limits for transgender rights recognition in the realm of human rights law. The chapter closes with an examination of the relationship between rights and dignity. The relationship between rights and dignity is a complex one; but it is key to understanding how legal policy, human rights rhetoric, and power relations structure the way transgender people navigate choices, shape family, and envision their place in society

## **CHAPTER 1: KINSHIP AND POWER**

Foundational terms once taken for granted in the study of kinship: heredity, parentage, marriage, and even gender, are no longer the static controls they were once assumed to be. Science and technology have expanded the ways in which we conceptualize heredity and parentage (Strathern 2005). The ability to physically and/or socially transition from one gender to another adds another element of innovation in the way kinship may be reckoned. When people undergo gender transition, they face a multitude of relationships and identity labels that must be reworked and renegotiated. Kinship terminologies and familial relationships are among some of the most complex changes to navigate. The analysis of lived experience is essential in understanding the ways in which kinship relations are transformed, created, or even erased. For example, when one marries, he or she becomes an affine and acquires a series of new relatives through marriage. When a person's sibling has children, he or she becomes "aunt" or "uncle". Each new label is embedded in a system of kinship roles that carry sets of rights, duties, expectations and obligations.

In the United States, kinship is reckoned along generational and gendered lines. Over time, we expect that an individual will cross generational lines – assuming new kinship titles and roles as each new generation is added to their lineage. These titles exist simultaneously and are added to previous titles, rather than cancelling them out. A father may eventually become a grandfather but will simply add that kin title to his collection of titles, roles, and responsibilities. A daughter may become a mother but will also remain a daughter. Gendered boundaries do not have the same cumulative characteristics or flexible nature. The transformation - from daughter to son, from aunt to uncle, from father to mother – is often met with confusion and resistance. It is at the intersection of change and resistance, however, that the relationship amongst kinship, identity

and power is highlighted. Examining gender transition through the lens of kinship requires us to reexamine the very foundation upon which notions of “kinship” and “relatedness” rest. Also significant in these findings is the way in which the power dynamics embedded in familial relationships become apparent at the time of gender transition. Not only do relationships change, but power dynamics shift significantly.

In this chapter, I analyze how transitioning gender often implies giving up the power to claim family ties. Transpeople find themselves without a concrete status in the kinship system – in a liminal space where rights, roles, and duties must be renegotiated. Some renegotiations are positive, while others entail a great deal of loss and distress. In nearly all cases, however, the renegotiation of kinship ties requires transpeople to relinquish the power to define themselves within the larger kinship network, and to wait for their kin to accept them (or not) in the context of their new gender identity and the roles that such an identity entails. Relinquishing the power to claim a kinship role and define themselves in the larger kinship network has a significant impact on the dignity of transpeople, not only within the context of kinship, but also in the realm of citizenship.

### **Kinship and Relatedness**

From an anthropological perspective, it has long been understood that kinship relations are based upon the symbolic construction of relatedness. What we understand by exploring kinship cross-culturally is how one defines relatedness and determines kin can vary greatly from one society to the next. In one society, a common heritage and shared biological descent from a common ancestor are sufficient for reckoning a kin relationship. In other societies, sharing food and nurturing one another is the way kinship ties are cemented. (Carsten 2000, Sahlins 2011,

Strathern 2005). One interesting ethnographic example comes from Fred Myers' exploration of Pintupi kin status. He writes: "Kin status among the Pintupi is largely a matter of feeling, and if a person feels unkindly treated, he may complain that the other does not (in pidgin) 'like' him or her and thus is not really *walytja (kin)*." (1979: 349) Certainly, the centrality of emotion to Pintupi kinship differs from North American kinship; but kinship symbols still hold significant emotional power and social significance.

In his seminal study of American kinship, David Schneider played a central role in critiquing how anthropologists had previously approached the study of kinship cross-culturally. Schneider noted that previous explorations of kinship in other societies were grounded in the Euro-American folk model. In the Euro-American folk model, there is a sharp distinction between substance and code, or biology and law – an understanding of relatedness Schneider argued was not a universal concept. He concluded that sexual procreation had been the symbol providing the central and defining feature of the family as a cultural unit in America; However, this privileging of sexual reproduction as a key to establishing kinship was not necessarily applicable elsewhere (1980:31). Significant in Schneider's study was taking American and European assumptions about kinship as subjects of analysis, rather than presuming that they were the standard for all kinship studies. As Janet Carsten noted, "anthropological analyses of kinship presumed what they should have subjected to analytic scrutiny" (2000:188). Schneider's critique was significant in destabilizing the importance of biological procreation as the unquestioned and uncontested basis for understanding kinship. The very notion that the biological "reality" of kinship and the social "construction" of kinship are two separate units of study, with the former being the domain of biologists or geneticists and the later anthropologists and sociologists, has only recently been scrutinized. Reproductive and medical technologies blur the boundaries that once

divided the biological from the social, in studies of kinship (Carsten 2007, Lenke 2009, Strathern 2005). These same medical technologies have impacted how gender is experienced throughout one's lifetime and have highlighted the fragile and limiting nature of a hegemonic kinship system that is rooted in gender divisions.

Marshal Sahlins describes kinship as “a manifold of intersubjective participations, founded on mutuality of being” (Sahlins 2011: 10). What constitutes that mutuality of being can and will vary, depending on the society being analyzed. Kin [sic] he notes, “are people who live each other's lives and die each other's deaths. To the extent they lead common lives, they partake of each other's sufferings and joys, sharing one another's experiences even as they take responsibility for and feel the effects of each other's acts” (Sahlins 2011:12). It is not difficult, then, to read the emotional charge that is implicit in a kinship relationship. The dominant view of kinship in anthropology today is less focused on a strict separation of the social and biological, and instead examines how mutual interests, experiences and connections define and acknowledge bonds that shape an individual's actions and interactions within a social group. Kinship is, after all, only visible in the interactions or social relations between individuals who acknowledge one another as kin. The rules that govern who is a relation and how that relationship comes to be, are first set by a kinship template; but they are constantly rearticulated and not fixed or static. As James Faubion notes, the terms of kinship:

“qualify the self as a subject through its relation to others. Correlatively, they qualify others to identify the self through their relation to it. Second, they are finitistic. Though rarely individualizing, they label the self in its particularity, and specifically, in the particularity of its relations to particular others. Third, whether given or ‘adopted’ they are normatively permanent. Once ascribed, they presumptively remain with the self through the course of its life, and even in the aftermath of its death. Finally, they are terms of being, not of doing. They can and of course do come with scripts or rulebooks attached. Yet the normativity of kinship is just that: definitive not of being kin but rather of being a good or a bad kinsperson” (Faubion: 12).

As we shall see in the narratives of transgender participants, kinship ties are often strained and modified during and after gender transition; but they are rarely severed altogether. The social relationships that the kinship role specifies may be cut off; but the kin relation, in and of itself, is seen as enduring and unbreakable. What changes is not necessarily the kin connection but the power relations that are contained in it. Even when kinship relations become strained, the connections themselves are seen as enduring and rooted in the “reality” of biological ties.

The biological grounding of kinship in the United States most likely plays a significant role in the insistence on viewing kin ties as a concrete and unchangeable aspect of an individual’s history. However, Strathern’s analysis of English kinship, and the changing concepts of “nature” in the face of medical and reproductive technology, highlights the fact that what constitutes relatedness and biological grounding tends to change historically and legally. These culturally embedded paradigms have significant social and legal consequences in the United States. In an examination of American adoption practices, Judith Modell (1994) points out that Federal law constructs kinship by mirroring biology, conforming to hegemonic notions of what is considered kinship. In the absence of biological ties, legal steps can be taken to codify relationships and provide them with permanence and stability. Biological ties to birth parents are erased, as legal ties to adopted parents are forged. As we shall discuss in Chapter Four, family law relies heavily on reproducing and maintaining hegemonic notions of what constitutes family, the foundation of which is still often heavily assumed to be steeped in shared substance and nurturing. Kinship ties are expected to endure even after the family itself disperses or dissolves altogether, such as in the case of divorce. In this case, Strathern notes, we may consider the fact that “the family dissolves but the kinship remains” (2005:26). Strathern’s work is significant in destabilizing the assumed basis of biology in kinship, and allows us to expand this

destabilization to the realm of gender – no longer assuming that the dominant categories defined along gender lines are somehow rooted in biology and will thus remain stable throughout time.

The words we choose to describe our family members are, in essence, the symbolic ascription of affective and nurturing ties. They provide an ideal set of behaviors and practices that carry powerful weight and significance (whether or not they live up to the ideal relationships and behaviors in practice). As Joan Bestard-Camps writes, “Kinship notions are symbols which provide meaning to personal relationships and make possible certain types of social experience” (xiv). There are, in fact, two levels of observation in this statement. The first is that kinship symbols serve to define the relationship to the individual who takes on the role of “relative”, and the second is that kinship symbols are recognized by the larger social group and provide a common set of experiences and expectations. To contextualize someone within a family group is to understand his or her experiences as kin, and to find commonality and humanity. This point is significant, and we shall return to it in later chapters when we examine the tendency of popular and academic discourse to situate transpeople as outside the fold of family. Kinship ties are not simply an intrinsic way to view one’s relationships and connections within a larger society, but they are also the way that the larger society labels, views and values an individual based on his or her relationships and relatedness.

Ties and attachments are created at both a micro and a macro level and often influence one another simultaneously. The degree to which we feel attached to our kinsfolk depends upon multiple factors. Individual personalities, of course, play a role in how close one feels to a given member of their family; but the strength of the ties and the magnitude of the feelings implied within a relationship may also be maximized or minimized depending upon the rights and obligations implicit in the familial kinship role and expectation. For example, in the United

States, the tie between a mother and son entails significant emotional and material exchanges and may be more emotionally charged than the tie between an uncle and nephew that carries less weight both emotionally and materially. Stronger kin ties also carry the potential for greater power imbalances, since the desire to maintain them is much stronger. Yanagisako notes that “inequality and hierarchy come already embedded in symbolic systems” (1995: ix). The symbols and practices of a kinship system distribute and naturalize power hierarchies – often along gender and age lines. As Rayna Rapp maintains, “Euro-American family life defines the intersection of gender and generation. It provides a language linking sex and age groups in patterns of hierarchy and dependence, authority, and obedience, spoken in the etiquette of generosity and responsibility” (1987:124). When an individual disrupts the gendered foundation upon which these hierarchies rest, the power balance of relationships is removed from the status quo. What we see in the relationships among kinsmen at the point of gender transition certainly signifies a change in relationship roles, but more significantly results in a change of power balances. Couple that with social and cultural prejudice against transpeople, and you have the start of a tumultuous journey through kinship relations.

Among transgender respondents to interview questions related to family dynamics and relationships during and after transition, the relationships that proved most volatile and difficult to navigate were those that implied a high level of emotional and material investment. These categories include: parent, child, and spouse. Relationships with cousins, brothers, and sisters were much more variable and had fairly high levels of successful transition of gender categories. One respondent, Stazia, noted that her younger sister was a big support in her life. She recounted her sister’s reaction positively during our interview. Her sister told her, “I don’t understand it, but I accept it.” Stazia noted that the two were now “closer than ever”. Donna, who never

married or had children, noted that her brother was the first person she told about her gender identity. His reaction was also positive. She recalls that her brother told her “I’ll always love you” and remains a close contact and support to this day. Many other respondents recalled their siblings being a positive support during their transition process and quick to use proper pronouns. In the cases where siblings were not supportive or rejected the transperson upon the revelation of gender identity, respondents were not focused on reestablishing or rebuilding relationships. This is markedly different from relationships with parents, spouses and children, where there was a much greater tendency to pursue continuity of a relationship.

However, focusing solely on kinship terms and kinship interactions that are recognized as familial risks reproducing the fallacy that kinship is somehow rooted in a biological reality that precedes our social interactions. It also obscures the relationships that are fostered in nonlinear or unexpected ways - relationships that develop unexpectedly due to extra-familial interactions and lead to alliances and a “mutuality of being” that could, under any classification system, be viewed as kinship. As we shall see in the next chapter, affinity developed through friendships, workplace interactions, or support group memberships can be just as strong, if not stronger, than relationships ascribed through one’s place in a certain kinship group. Kath Weston (1991) explores the concept of “fictive kin” or “chosen families” in the context of gay and lesbian families, as she contests the notion that gay people are situated “outside kinship’s door” and notes that most “chosen” families established outside of blood or marriage ties coexist with natal families. Sally Hines also notes that “friends are positioned as family” (2007:147), suggesting the primacy of friendship that exists especially amongst gay men and lesbians. Friendship provides an important source of social capital as well. Pierre Bourdieu defines social capital as “the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable

network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition – or in other words, to membership in a group” (Bourdieu 1986). Ties rooted in friendship must be even more actively pursued when kinship templates cannot enforce relations or obligations of reciprocity or relatedness. While works emphasizing the importance of friendship networks for queer-identified individuals are certainly significant in demonstrating the enduring relationships available to gay and lesbian families, they run the risk of reifying the notion that there is a tangible distinction between families of origin and chosen ones. There is a common assumption that people who fall under the umbrellas of gay, lesbian, or transgender are immediately members of alternative non-familial communities. As Schneider pointed out in his examination of the American kin universe, all relatives are unequal, as they are all in fact chosen. Individuals select whom to “count” as family members from an “almost infinite number of knowable kin” (1975:9). In the United States, this selection is often based on feelings of affinity, frequency of contact, and emotional connections. By examining how kinship patterns are both altered and constructed for individuals as they transition gender categories, we avoid judging the validity of various family forms and instead focus on how kinship is enacted as a lived experience.

The possibility of dismantling kinship ties raises questions when we consider Faubion’s assertion that, once ascribed to an individual, the identities encompassed by kin membership remain with the self for the entire life course and arguably even endure after death. He notes that “the normativity of kinship is just that: definitive not of being kin but rather being a good or a bad kinsperson” (2001:12). Certainly, in the statements of transgender respondents, the feeling of being detached from kin can also be read as a liminal state that must be patiently endured until time and distance allows for the restoration of relationships that characterize enduring kinship bonds. Questions are then raised as to what constitutes these enduring bonds of kinship. What

makes them so difficult to erase once they are established? Certainly, the emotional ties that are forged under the symbolism of kinship relations are significant. Also important to examine, however, are those emotional ties that come to be under relationships not immediately recognized as “kinship”.

As John Borneman writes in his analysis of care and kinship in East Berlin, “anthropology’s quest for a regulative ideal for humanity has involved the repression of care and the privileging of communal forms of reproduction. Anthropology should instead privilege an analysis of caring and being cared for as processes of non-coercive, voluntary affiliation” (2001: 30-31). Certainly, it is important to expand the sentiment of looking outside the folk-models of “substance” and “alliance” that are rooted in ideas about kinship to include a broader definition of how people make connections— especially in recognizing family forms that have historically been ignored, delegitimized or regulated to fictive status (Butler 1999, Hines 2007, Godelier 2012, Moore 2011, Sahlins 2013, Weston 1991). However, it becomes evident in listening to kinship narratives that individuals seem to be more willing to endure painful interactions from people who fit under hegemonic notions of ‘kin’ than from those who they label as friends, allies, or acquaintances. There is something enduring about the identity implicit in socially recognized kinship ties that cannot be explained by focusing on care and nurturing alone. There are also underlying currents of power differentials among kin members that become strikingly evident when an individual transitions and requests that the terms of kinship shift across gendered boundaries. The refusal to use proper pronouns or call the kin member by the terms signified by a new gender status ends up resulting in a visible power struggle, with the transgender kin member often being put in a position of waiting for the relative to recognize their new gender, or enduring and justifying the family member’s refusal to use new gender-appropriate terms.

Sahlins writes that “while people often decide which kinship relations are appropriate to them, they do not thereby decide what is appropriate to their relationships” (2013:6). Sahlins is arguing that, while ties can be fostered or severed, taking on a given kinship title carries with it a fixed set of rights, roles, and duties. Examining kinship dynamics “in action”, however, leads us to question whether or not this argument would extend to kin ties for individuals who identify as transgender. As we shall see, certain kin relationships have proven to be remarkably flexible in their ability to choose what is appropriate to the relationship. Titles may change or remain the same; but relationships can and do endure and adapt. These adaptations are unique in that they do not follow a specific standardized social script. Therefore, what we are able to witness as a family member transitions from one gender to another is the innate creativity and flexibility of kin relationships. It would be a mistake, however, to assume that creativity and flexibility are always translated into positive familial outcomes. Will new relationships be positive and affirming or negative and destructive? The answers to such questions are, of course, complex. There is an element of power in the ability to set the terms of the new relationship.

The view that kinship is bound by a predetermined social script may make traditionally recognized kin relationships appear more enduring and static than those established through care and friendship alone. However, kinship is a concept that has been demonstrated to have great potential for flexibility. Janet Carsten acknowledges the flexibility and endless possibilities of crafting kinship when she writes that kinship is, “among other things, an area of life in which people invest their emotions, their creative energy, and their new imaginings” (2007:9). In his examination of changing patterns of intimacy in modern society, Anthony Giddens writes that “our interpersonal existence is being thoroughly transfigured, involving us all in what I shall call everyday social experiments, with which wider social changes more or less oblige us to engage”

(1993:8). Marilyn Strathern reiterates this sentiment, as she notes that the family form, and the notion of family itself, has changed significantly throughout history (Strathern 1992a, see also Rapp 1987). Surely, these are times where kinship, friendship and interpersonal connections are transforming the very notion of how we think of family, relatedness, love and the self.

Transgender kinship is only one angle from which to explore this shift in how we create, envision, and maintain social connections. This chapter explores both the conservative and creative possibilities that transgender individuals and their relatives encounter when kinship roles and expectations are tested and transformed by gender transition.

### **Parents and Children**

Over the course of twenty in-depth interviews that I conducted with transgender respondents during my research, one of the questions I asked was: “Who played a central role in family life for you during childhood?” Without fail, individuals would respond with “my parents” or “my mother and father.” This response would probably not strike one as a remarkable finding. After all, regardless of gender identity, the familial relationship between a parent and child is one of the first strong connections that individuals remember when reflecting on family life. It is also a bond that is closely tied to nature and believed to have a strong foundational basis in our very genetic code and subsequent identity. This speaks to Strathern’s assertion that, in Euro-American kinship systems, “human kinship is regarded as a fact of society rooted in the facts of nature” (Strathern 1992b:16). However, as social scientists and queer theorists have noted, this assumption of kinship’s natural foundation privileges heterosexual and hegemonic family forms over non-traditional or queer family forms (Freeman 2007, Gittins 2010, Halberstam 2007, Strathern 2005). Strathern argues: “Insofar as kinship is thought of as combining social and natural domains, and is thus the place of overlap between them, the recognition of one

component without the other always gives people pause.” (1992b:20) While Strathern’s passage is written in the context of parent-child relationships assumed to be rooted in both procreation and nurturance, this concept is equally interesting to examine in the context of gender transition. An individual’s gender and subsequent place in the kinship system are seen to be both natural and constant. The title “son” assumes a constant and life-long gender identity in order to retain the title. When the natural basis of gender is upset, and that son transitions gender, does the title of “son” switch seamlessly to the title of “daughter”? What are the symbolic, social, and relational consequences of such a shift? In the narrative examples below, people give pause when the natural and continual basis of symbolic kinship titles is shifted. The titles, relationships, and variations that result prove that kinship relations are enduring and dynamic. Creativity and dynamism in the parent-child relationship, however, is often preceded by strife and disruption in the narratives of transgender participants. Accepting a child’s new gender identity proves to be challenging and frightening for parents. I was able to attend several presentations and meetings for parents of transgender children; and one of the prominent emotions highlighted during these sessions was fear. One of the workshop titles for parents of transgender children was “From Fear to Hope”, illustrating the emotional and visceral reaction many parents experienced upon learning of their child’s chosen new gender identity. Several parents in the session were afraid for their transgender children who now had to live in an often cruel and hostile world. This uncertainty often drove them to avoid fully accepting their child’s new identity and even hindered the transition process, hoping that the gender identity crisis would be ‘only a phase’. Andrew Solomon lays a framework for understanding this resistance in his book, *Far From the Tree: Parents, Children, and the Search for Identity*. Solomon distinguishes between vertical and horizontal identities within families and discusses why they

are received very differently in the familial context. Vertical identities are identities that are passed down from parents to children; and they include things like ethnicity, religion and social class. Horizontal identities, on the other hand, are inherent or acquired traits in a child that are foreign to parents. Horizontal identities include things such as physical disability, transgender identity, and psychopathy. When parents do not or cannot engage with their children's horizontal identity, children must seek support outside of the familial sphere and in places like peer support groups or medical facilities. Solomon notes that these two forms of identities are treated very differently, both within the family and by larger society. He explains that "vertical identities are often treated as identities; horizontal ones are treated as flaws" (2012:4). Indeed the approach many families take upon learning their child identifies as transgender is to seek out support from peers. Organizations such as PFLAG (a family and ally organization) and smaller, locally based support groups were cited by respondents as being critical in their understanding of how to navigate relationships after the revelation of their transgender status. Many parents also noted that it took time for them to accept the transition of a child from "son" to "daughter" or daughter to son; and they were often able to use their child's preferred new name before they were able to introduce their child using new kinship terms. For example, one mother was initially able to go from calling her child "Tom" to "Heather"; but she would not introduce that child as "daughter". She preferred to introduce Heather as "my child"; and it took many years before she was comfortable using the word "daughter". Other parents, during the support group meeting, echoed the difficulty of realizing that their child's gender transition was permanent and thus warranted a change of terms of address and reference within the family. These notions of time, permanence, and stability are key to understanding how relations evolve.

Many respondents disclosed their gender identity to parents at the urging of their therapists. Conversations were often fraught with anxiety concerning how the news would be received.

Claire (58), who came out to her mother three years prior, feared the worst upon disclosure of her transgender identity. *“I had no idea how she would react – if she would have a heart attack and die – that was my biggest fear. That I’d kill her.”* Claire decided to write a letter to her mother and read it aloud during a visit. Her mother took the news relatively well. Claire recalls: *“She cried...and, the first thing she said was: ‘I’m so sorry you had to suffer through this for so long.’ And she’s been good.”* (Claire’s mother was living in another state and spoke on the phone weekly; but they only saw one another at annual family reunions).

Helen (42) came out more slowly to her parents, in a series of phone calls and conversations. *“I don’t know how I did it. I was in therapy, so it was kind of progression, like I would have phone calls with them and they would...being fearful of coming out I would sneak in words like, ‘if I fully transitioned’ you know.”* Helen’s father ended up being much more supportive initially than her mother. Her mother raised concerns that Helen was being selfish and tearing apart her family, which Helen recalled with a great deal of pain and resentment. (Helen had a wife and two children)

Malia (25) also revealed her gender identity to her mother while in therapy. Instead of feeling like it was an important piece of her transition process, she felt that the therapist pushed her into coming out prematurely. She was very unhappy with the overall experience of gender therapy. *“It seems like gender therapists are obsessed with eliminating every possible thing that could stop you from transitioning and one of them is forcing you to come out to everyone you know.”* Her mother did not receive the news well and called her gender identity “disgusting”. It was

only after several years that Malia's mother came to accept and embrace her child's gender.

Malia said the turning point came when her mother began realizing that she was happier than she had ever been and was much more vibrant and active.

Respondents noted that their parents, even if supportive, were very surprised and did not have a great deal of knowledge about what it meant to be transgender. The majority of respondents who reported that their parents lacked knowledge on the topic were between the ages of 45 and 65; and they attributed it to a generational "information gap" on what transgender identity entailed.

While people have moved from one gender to another throughout history, the widespread concept of transgender as a political and social identity label is relatively recent – emerging in the 1990's and expanding significantly through the information technology available on the internet (Valentine 2006). Parents of transgender youth (transpeople who are under the age of 21) were more likely to have a more solid foundational understanding of what transgender identity meant, and they were also more likely to actively pursue information on the topic.

Some respondents noted the importance of giving parents a quick "Transgender 101" course before revealing their gender identity. Teri (49) ended up creating a website for hir\* (gender neutral pronoun) mother, to provide basic information on transgender identity. S/he felt that the other information available was too sensationalizing or overly sexual, and didn't did not give a true picture of what it meant to be transgender. This desire, to present an accurate and thorough picture of what transgender means, was commonly raised by participants when discussing the process of revealing gender identity to parents. Regardless of parental age at the time of learning their child's gender identity, PFLAG and other support groups proved to be instrumental in helping parents access information in a supportive environment. This reliance on peer support to scaffold parental understanding and acceptance reinforces Solomon's (2012) theory that

horizontal identities are viewed as conditions that must be dealt with through extra-familial resources.

When a transgender person revealed his or her new gender to a parent, the outcome was never certain or predictable. For some respondents, parental acceptance came relatively easily. For others, it was a time of conflict, painful fights and possible rejection. Regardless of the initial reaction, however, there was tension in transitioning from “son” to “daughter” or “daughter” to “son”, both socially and symbolically. While parents may accept a child as transgender and react in a supportive way, the choice to call that child by a new name and using new pronouns remained daunting. Roberta (43) reflected on the difficulty of having her parents truly seeing her as a daughter following gender transition. When I asked if they now called her their daughter, she sighed and replied: *“My family has been doing that...I think they’re going out of their way to help me. You know it’s not because that’s the way they’re seeing it, it’s because they know that’s the way I want it to be.”* It seemed as though Roberta really wanted her parents to use the terms authentically.

Claire (58) experienced a similar tension with feeling unquestionably accepted as a daughter. She felt that her mother was being polite, more than authentically considering her a daughter. *“There’s a lot of history there, so it’s not automatic. I don’t know...I think at the very least she tries to be respectful.”* When I asked her if her mother talked about her as a “daughter” when she wasn’t around, she said she couldn’t be sure. She did not know if her mother talked about her at all in her absence.

Most people who reflected on their new place in the family, following gender transition, noted a resistance on the part of parents to use terms of address and reference, and pronouns,

accordingly. All who noted this resistance were very quick to make excuses for their parent's inability to use new names and pronouns. The transperson was essentially left to petition for a new place within the kinship system, often experiencing feelings of frustration and disempowerment. Respondents indicated great pain and disappointment when parents failed to use the new pronouns and kin terms associated with their new gender identity.

Carol (46) noted: *"She tries the best she can. But for calling me Carl for forty years...it's kind of very difficult for her to change back to Carol."* Trish (51) had a similar reflection on why she remained a son in her mother's eyes: *"Not with malicious intent...just habit. The way the mind thinks."* Paul (38), who had never had a good relationship with his parents, claimed that he didn't care how his parents addressed him. For him, maintaining ties – in whatever form – was the most important thing. He noted: *"My family...as long as they talk to me, I don't give a crap what it is."* He did, however, express frustration at his mother's refusal to see him as a son and her tendency to use it as a weapon against him during arguments.

The terms "son" and "daughter" are deeply rooted in gender and are viewed in the United States as inextricably tied to nature. As Strathern suggests, "human kinship is regarded as a fact of society rooted in the facts of nature" (2005:16). Childbirth and nurturance are often strongly grounded in the notions of continuity, permanence, and stability. The notion of permanence is seen as extending beyond the individual's lifetime, as he or she takes a place in the family's history. Gender transition, therefore, challenges assumptions about both nature (that the "facts" of nature and circumstances of birth will determine one's place in a kinship system) and continuity (that the status bestowed upon one as a kinsperson at birth will remain constant during one's lifetime and after one's death). This challenge leads to both discomfort and conflict within families, at least initially, as we can see with narratives of coming out. It also leads to resistance,

and illustrates the difficulty of moving from one category to another without a significant amount of time and effort. While the terms that defined kinship relations for transgender respondents often remained contested or in limbo in the realm of interactions with their parents, relationships were still held and maintained. In order to maintain these relationships, transgender family members often found that they were the ones sacrificing the ideal interactions they envisioned in order to maintain bonds. Sally Hines noticed a similar pattern of “kin keeping” in her analysis of transgender intimacy and care in the UK. She noted that “it is often the marginalized people that are responsible for putting the dominant at ease” (2007:153). Indeed, it became evident in speaking with transgender people about their ties with parents that there was a great power differential between the parent and child, both during and after the revelation of their new gender identity. The expectation in nearly all of my collected narratives was that it was the responsibility of the child to provide information to the parents on both a general and personal level. When parents learned of their child’s new gender identity, the “ball was in their court”. They could choose to accept the child’s new gender fully, ignore the new information, or sever ties completely. When parents failed to acknowledge their adult child’s new name or gender pronouns, it was the child who crafted understanding and excuses for that parent. This asymmetrical power distribution in relationships, upon confession of gender, was not confined to parent-child relationships alone. For transgender respondents, this scenario of handing over power at the moment of revealing ones transgender identity played out in each realm of kinship, as we shall see in the following section covering relationships with spouses, children, and friends.

## **Spouses, Lovers, and Children**

In childhood, the parent-child dyad and the interactions of the nuclear family form the most important relationships for care and nurturance. However, adulthood is often marked by a distinct transition in care and intimacy, moving from a parent-child nucleus to partnerships outside the natal family that are often romantic in nature. For respondents who had been married at the time of transition, the revelation of gender identity was most likely to be first revealed to spouses and lovers. The most intimate of relationships and care-based nurturing often take place between spouses and lovers, parents and children. These private domains often encapsulate what first comes to mind when one mentions “family”. These are also the relationships that end up unacknowledged - or even denied- to those who fall outside of the gender-conforming hegemony that defines family life in the United States.

These private relationships are essential to analyze when examining the impact of gender transition on kinship patterns and family life. As Sally Hines states, “While the impact of transition upon relationships with partners, lovers, and children will differ in individual circumstances, the process of transition will always take place to some extent within a social framework of intimacy” (2007:127). Coming out to a spouse or child takes a lot of strategic planning and is often avoided until a moment of crisis. This crisis occurs when a transperson realizes the pain and emotional turmoil that comes with hiding their gender identity, is too heavy a burden to bear and outweighs the potential risk of losing their spouse or partner. Coming out was, as I shall later explain, a carefully crafted arithmetic designed to minimize conflict and maximize positive relationships.

Whether discussions were occurring in interviews, support groups or workshops, a common fear for all transpeople was the loss of spouses, lovers and children upon the revelation of their gender identity. My findings echo Hines' (2007) study on the transgender practices of intimacy. Gender transition does often mark the end of a transperson's marriage. Attempts to stay together often characterized the early stages of transition; but eventually, the majority of relationships ended in separation. In several cases, the spouses maintained their relationship and the household composition did not change. However, all but one of these relationships were marked by tension, resentment, and difficulties that put a great strain on the union. Couples that remained together harmoniously after gender transition were few and far between.

Legal marriage in the United States is not viewed as an eternal and unbreakable bond. Divorces are relatively easy to acquire and fairly common. Anthony Giddens argues that this is due to the rise of the pure relationship: "a situation where a social relation is entered into for its own sake, for what can be derived by each person from a sustained association with another, and which is continued only insofar as it is thought by both parties to deliver enough satisfaction for each individual to stay with it" (1993:58). As we shall see in this chapter, the process of transition often proves to be a source of difficulty in maintaining a mutually satisfactory relationship.

### **Love and Marriage**

For respondents who were married at the time of their transition, disclosure of gender identity and the impact of gender transition on marriage varied greatly from one couple to the next. Yet an outpouring of intense emotion throughout the process of gender transition was a recurrent theme. Revealing one's gender identity to an intimate partner proved to be an extremely stressful and upsetting situation for many respondents. Many of the married respondents with

whom I spoke waited years to disclose their gender identities to their spouses. Narratives that recounted the “Coming Out” experience, in the context of marriage, followed a distinct pattern of crises: self-discovery/acceptance, fear, and confession. These crises normally occurred when the individual could no longer live in his or her assigned gender role and felt an overwhelming urge to reveal their true gender identity. This urge to reveal true gender identity led to self-initiated online research, and sometimes professional therapy. Fear of rejection was an overwhelming precursor to the moment of ‘confession’ to their spouses. It was at this point when gender identity was revealed; and, as we previously discussed in the process of “coming out” to parents, power was handed to the partner. While this pattern was similar for all kin relationships, for married participants, revealing gender struggles to their spouse proved to be extremely fraught with stress and fear as illustrated by the examples below.

**Roberta (43): Female Gender Identity, Married to Rachel (40)**

Roberta felt that she was different since age 11 but did not know how to articulate her feelings.

*“I didn’t tell anybody ANYTHING until 10 years after I was married. We had been married for almost 10 years – or we had been together easily for 10 years before I told her. ...I got to the point where I figured I’ve got to tell her even if it ruined - if it destroyed our marriage...”*

In Roberta’s case, her spouse was the one who provided resources and information on support groups. They attended meetings together and were partners in Roberta’s journey to understand her gender identity.

Rachel recalls Roberta’s confession and depicts the fear and anxiety she exhibited while revealing her gender struggles.

*“It was extremely - what I remember is, we were sitting on a bed together and I suddenly could feel, through the mattress, her heartbeat. Like, I could feel the pounding of her heart through the substrate of the mattress...(Laughs)...and like, through the air – it was just one of the most intense moments when someone has to do something that terrifying and painful.”*

I asked Roberta what changed in her marital relationship after she began gender transition.

*“Socially, everything changed. Um, between us, far less than you would expect. Um, but socially, she had to be the spouse of a transperson for years. You know, genderqueer , genderfucked and everything in between. And then - now, it’s decidedly we’re a lesbian couple in the world.”*

Roberta and Rachel remained married and had two children after Roberta had begun her transition from male to female. They struggled with how to explain their relationship to new acquaintances, since they appeared to be a lesbian couple. Yet they did not feel that they qualified as such, due to the different history and life experiences they undertook to become two married women. This relationship illustrates the potential of transitioning from “husband” to “wife” or “spouse”, relatively seamlessly on a personal level. Roberta and Rachel were the only couple with whom I spoke to experience such a smooth transition. Their experience is an important illustration of the possibilities that exist within the bounds of marriage.

### **Terri (49): Binary Gender Identity, Married**

Terri’s situation is markedly different than Roberta’s. S/he also went through a process of self-discovery before revealing her gender struggles to hir wife. (Terri prefers gender-neutral pronouns to compliment her non-binary gender identity). Terri describes hir gender identity as

fluid; however, during the interview s/he discussed in depth hir preference to present as female full-time (if there were no financial or social constraints). Terri also told hir wife around 10 years into the marriage. At that point, they were raising young children.

*“Long story short, I would have come out to her earlier, but I was so afraid she would take it wrong because she wouldn’t understand things. I had talked to a lot of people who had come out to others, and I wanted to make sure I didn’t make any mistakes. So, one of the things I decided I would do, is I would spend a few months trying to kind of just bring up the topic periodically, to sort of educate her so she didn’t freak. And just about the time where I was going to do it, her dad ends up getting diagnosed with cancer. So I wasn’t about to hit her with all of this. So he lasted for about a year and a half, two years. So it was after that I ended up telling her. I would have ended up telling her a couple years earlier, but if it went badly, I didn’t want it to be even worse for her.”*

*D: How did she handle it?*

*“She was fine. Of course she had some natural questions, um, I was so nervous leading up to telling her. She recognized that in me. So when I finally told her, it was a relief for her because she thought that something else was going on. Like that I was in trouble, or I was sick, or I was going to divorce her or something. So she was fine, comparatively. She still had questions though, like ‘Do you see yourself getting a sex change? Do you see yourself divorcing? What about the kids?’ So there were a handful of questions that went along with that and they were understandable and natural, and it took awhile to actually get that stuff out to others because you, as a transperson, have been thinking about it for a long long time. So what you don’t want to do is dish it out faster than they*

*can absorb it, and anecdotally, you heard all these horror stories about kids being taken away, people losing their jobs. She had concerns like, if it became known, would the state come and take our kids? I've gotta say she didn't like the idea of me being trans. She accepted it, and her attitude was, 'I wouldn't turn my son away if he was trans, so why would I turn my husband away?' Which I think is a very mature and remarkable attitude."*

Terri and hir wife remained married. Unlike Rachel, however, Terri's wife set specific limits on hir gender presentation and transition.

*"You know, when I first came out to my wife, one of the first things that was important to her was that I didn't modify my body. And nothing – not even getting pierced ears. And eventually she came to – as she started thinking about this and she started getting more comfortable with it and she realized I wasn't going to abandon her, she warmed up to the idea of making some minor changes, like I got my ears pierced. It was a big deal for her, but it was so satisfying that I got that."*

Here we see an exercise in power, with Terri's wife regulating how and when s/he can modify her body in ways that better match hir gender identity.

### **Helen (42): Female Gender Identity, Divorced**

Helen also told her wife after ten years of marriage. She had been extensively researching gender transition online, and she realized that she was not alone in her struggle with understanding her gender identity. She decided that she had to confess her feelings to her wife before the birth of their first child.

*“I ended up coming out to Lindsey during – I still feel like such a jerk for this – during her pregnancy with Madeline, because I was fearful of putting her in a position where she was going to have a child with somebody and didn’t know who that person was...it was about being true to my partner.”*

*D: How was her reaction?*

*H: “Fearful. Scary. To this day she- she’ll describe that as the point where she was physically unattracted to me. We stayed together for 10 years, and then my desire to dress became so overwhelming.”*

Helen and Lindsey had one more child after Helen confessed her gender identity to her wife. They divorced shortly after he was born.

*“It was sort of Lindsey saying ‘We need to get a divorce.’ And the way she said it was, ‘If you transition or you don’t transition -even if you don’t- if you persist on being as feminine as you can, even part time, I can’t be your partner.’”*

Lindsey had been the one to initiate divorce. Helen expressed regret that they were unable to maintain their marriage. She was lonely and craved the connection of having a spouse. It is not due to lack of proximity, however. Helen and Lindsey are divorced but living together and co-parenting their young children. Helen describes the split as amicable and remains close friends with Lindsey.

*“I think we crossed the line on friendship because we...I mean, we call it that. It’s a very close friendship because we – we’re attached to...like some people tell me while we’re talking...’Is she like a sister?’ No...she’s not like a sister. At some level, it’s still a soul-*

*mate. It's still someone – and for her too – when something good or bad happens, the only person she's calling is me.”*

This example points to Hines' assertion that “contemporary practices of intimacy represent a blurring of the demarcation between lovers and friends” (2007:131). In this relationship, Helen and Lindsey transitioned from spouses to co-parents, remaining close friends and confidants even after the dissolution of marital bonds. This echoes Hines' assertion that “intimacy remains a fluid rather than constant process that is frequently able to transgress the boundaries of sexual relationships and friendships” (2007:131). The kinship ties have dissolved, but the family remains in a new, decentered and plastic form – rooted in common interests and shared intimacy, rather than legal or cognatic ties.

### **Stazia (61): Female Gender Identity, Divorced**

Stazia's wife found her cross-dressing during the first week of their marriage. It caused a small argument at the time, but it was shelved for nearly 25 years. During that time, Stazia did not dress as female again until she turned 50. At that point, a milestone birthday and the events of September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001 made her reevaluate her life and her desires. She dressed up as “Stazia” for the first time at an employer's Halloween party but did not tell her wife. A co-worker threatened to show photographs to Stazia's wife, showing her in female clothing, if she did not inform her wife what was happening. That was the catalyst for a confession.

Stazia told her wife, just before leaving for the weekend to visit their daughter in college.

*“Like an idiot, I told her just before I left to go. She freaked. I left, and of course when I came back I said ‘Don't worry - I'm just a cross dresser.’ And she said ‘I've seen this*

*before – people say I’m just a cross dresser, and two years later they’re in a wedding dress marrying a guy.’ “*

At that point, the marriage, as Stazia put it, “went sour”. Stazia’s wife demanded that she get therapy if the marriage was to continue. Therapy only reinforced Stazia’s desire to live fully as a female, which led to the eventual dissolution of the marriage. Stazia feels, in retrospect, that the divorce was crucial in allowing her to fully explore her gender identity.

*“I mean, I would have stayed with it [the marriage], and that would have changed my life today. I probably would be more of a cross dresser, and that’s that.”*

This is not to say that the divorce was not upsetting to Stazia. She experienced the grief of losing a marriage of 25 years.

*“I remember crying myself to sleep every night for like two months because she was gone, we weren’t getting together, I was alone, I was gonna die alone. Because she said I wasn’t going to have any friends. She said, ‘I read about it on the internet – you’re gonna die alone.’ And I thought, ‘I guess I am’. But then, it’s like, ‘I can be Stazia whenever I want!’ So highs and lows. And after two months I stopped crying, but I still felt bad.”*

These four paradigmatic examples highlight the diversity of experiences that individuals can experience when transitioning genders within a marriage. They represent common themes found within my larger sample and within the literature on transgender marriage (Hines 2007). While Roberta and Terri both stayed with their spouses, the level of support for gender transition and the dynamics of the relationship were markedly different. For Helen and Stazia, divorce led to very different relationships with their former spouses, and shifts in intimacy. Both recalled their

spouse feeling unattracted to them upon learning of their female gender identity. Claire and Amanda, other respondents who were not quoted above, also recalled that sexual intimacy ceased upon the revelation of gender identity. There is an important interplay here between gender and sexuality, which highlights the complexity of gender transition within a marital union. The transformation of gender marks a transformation in sexuality as well. When Helen, Stazia, and Claire and transitioned from male to female, they also transitioned from 'heterosexual males' to 'lesbian females' in their intimate relationships. Their partners, on the other hand, remained grounded in their genders and sexual identities as heterosexual females. They no longer viewed their spouses as acceptably intimate partners. This incompatibility of gender and attraction put a great deal of stress on the marriages and was a major factor in their decisions to dissolve them. The couples I met during my fieldwork, who did stay together, often highlighted their flexible sexual identity when describing their deciding factors in staying together. For example, one couple mentioned that, upon the husband's decision to transition to female, little changed in the sphere of intimacy because the wife "had been in relationships with women in the past". This complex relationship between gender and sexuality is further highlighted by the fact that many individuals, in my sample and in Hines' (2007) UK sample, noted a shift in their sexual identity upon gender transition. Transwomen (male to female), most notably, reported a stronger attraction to men following transition. Transmen (female to male) tended to be situated within a lesbian identity prior to gender transition and often remained attracted to females after transition.

The decision to maintain or dissolve the marriage was often in the hands of the non-transgender spouse. The majority of individuals who went through a divorce after gender transition reported a great deal of sadness and regret. For these individuals, the dissolution of the relationship did

not feel mutually beneficial at all. The decision to unilaterally end marital ties points to the imbalance of power in the relationship and the inability to freely negotiate new marital relationships following gender transition. Rachel articulated this handing off of power in her recollection of Roberta's moment of disclosing her transgender identity. She recalled: "*Oh my gosh – this person just handed over all their power to me and said, 'Go ahead and judge me' and it was really – that's what struck me about the moment.*" While not articulated by every participant I spoke to about marriage during my fieldwork, this handoff of power at the time of gender disclosure was certainly a theme. The power, in the case of married couples, rested in the decision of the non-transgender spouse to maintain or sever marital ties. The transgender spouse was left with little choice but to wait for someone else's decision.

These four narratives illustrate the themes of power, flexibility and limits of marital ties during and after gender transition, which were raised in interviews across my sample. We see the possibility of going from husband to wife, husband to spouse, husband to friend, and husband to ex-husband. The two couples who remained married had demonstrated varying levels of accepting gender transition. For Roberta and Rachel, the focus was on Rachel achieving her desired gender presentation. For Terri and her wife, there were rules and limits that had to be set, allowing Terri to express her femininity in certain contexts and within certain set limits. The two couples who divorced had very different relationships once the marriage dissolved, too. For Helen and her ex-wife, the bonds of friendship outlasted the ties of marriage. At the time of the interview, they were cohabiting and co-parenting in relative harmony. For Stazia and her ex-wife, there was no contact whatsoever; and Stazia lived alone. These new relationships, born of gender transition, do not follow a particular pattern or conform to a fixed set of expectations. This leads to both flexibility and fragility for all parties involved.

While Giddens' notion of pure relationships and plastic sexuality were focused on romantic and intimate relationships, we will see that all kin ties are increasingly flexible and unbound. They are driven by personal needs and mutual interests, rather than based on marriage, birth or nurturance. As we expand beyond marriage in the analysis of kinship ties, we move onto the dynamics of transgender parents and their children -still in the realm of intimacy but highlighting a very different sort of kin ties. While kinship ties, created through the institution of marriage, are viewed in our society as negotiable and able to dissolve in the case of divorce, the kinship ties that bind parent and child are assumed to be much more stable and enduring. For transpeople, however, this is not always the case. We shall see that, for transgender families, the relationship between parent and child, during and after gender transition, is just as complex and diverse as the relationship between spouses.

## **Parenting**

Examining parent-child relationships in the context of gender transition leads to important insight into how kinship ties - so often assumed to be static and grounded in a fixed gender- can transform and challenge hegemonic notions of what constitutes motherhood and fatherhood. For a long time, social scientists have been aware of changes in how individuals become parents and how parenting roles are challenged by new family organizations. Social and technological changes in the path to parenthood, such as sperm banks, invitro fertilization, surrogacy and adoption, have posed new ways in which to view relatedness (Strathern 2005, Castell 1997, Modell 1994, Moore 2011). Queer frontiers in partnering and parenting are only the most recent notions of family ties, in a long history of changing notions of family ties in the United States. Hines notes that "Shifts in gendered parenting roles problematize normative assumptions of the link between parenting identity that firmly situates motherhood with female biology and

fatherhood with male” (2007: 145). Motherhood and fatherhood can no longer be assumed to be rooted in static gender identities. However, what I found throughout the course of my fieldwork, was that while many kinship terms changed during gender transition and people moved relatively easily from aunt to uncle or brother to sister, the categories of mother and father were not as easy to interchange. This is significant and indicates something inherent in the roles and representation of a mother and father that reach far beyond gender expression and identity. The ways in which children reacted to their parent’s new gender identity and the relationship changes that ensued, were diverse and dependent upon both the age of the children at the time of the parent’s gender transition and the individual parent-child relationship. In one-on-one interviews and during support group meetings, narratives of gender transition’s impact upon the parent and child relationship pointed to the personalization and individuality of kinship ties and relationship maintenance. Both during and after gender transition, the power imbalance that surfaced in marital relationships often transferred to parent-child interactions. Much like spouses, upon the revelation of a parent’s gender identity, the children had the power to decide what to call their parent -whether to use that parent’s preferred pronouns, and how much contact to maintain. Transgender respondents remained the ones reaching out for (and patiently waiting for) acceptance and reincorporation into a nurturing relationship. Instead of relationships being maintained on the basis of mutual interest and obligation, there was a very one-sided process of negotiation where the children were presented with information and given the choice of how that information should (or should not) change the dynamics of the relationship. The negotiations and relationship transformations inherent in transgender kinship serve to challenge the notion that kinship ties are somehow eternal, enduring, or unchanging. They additionally challenge the idea that kinship, in and of itself, creates family. A stark, sad and telling quote from Stazia,

during a discussion about her children, illustrates such disconnection: *“I don’t know...my kids, I don’t feel like they’re my family anymore. My daughter, yes, but I only see her once a year.”*

Stazia’s two sons had completely cut contact with her, and her daughter remained distant – visiting around Christmas but not making an effort to reach out at other times throughout the year. Plasticity in kinship may provide endless possibilities for some individuals, but it may also provide discouraging and isolating roadblocks for others. In the following narrative excerpts, we shall see examples of both. The participants with whom I discussed parenting all had different strategies for coming out (or not coming out’) to their children. This was consistently done after discussing their gender identities with their spouses.

Terri had never discussed gender identity with hir children, who are 8, 16 and 18. When I asked her how she planned to eventually reveal hir gender identity, she stated:

*“What will probably happen is we’ll probably come out to the two oldest ones within the next few years – well – they also may know now and just not say anything. I do a lot of work for ‘Celestial Celebration’ and Transgender Outreach Society, so I’m getting all this stuff, and we have this stuff all over the house and I get catalogs with my – with my name on it. My femme name as well as my boy name, so it’s not that hard to piece these things together, but it may be the elephant in the living room, or it may be that they just didn’t know.”*

I asked her what s/he thought hir children would call her after they found out s/he was more inclined to represent in the female gender. She replied,

*“I can envision things like my kids always calling me dad, regardless of how I was dressed. But if we were out in public, I can see them either referring to me by my first name or as Mom. Just as, you know, really as a self-protection mechanism.”*

Stazia’s transition led to a divorce from her wife and estrangement from two of her three children. Her ex-wife was the one who disclosed Stazia’s gender transition to her children, who were all adults at the time. She was still in contact with her daughter, but that contact was limited to one visit per year. During those visits and occasional phone conversations, her daughter still called her “Dad”.

*“Yes – Dad. And I like that because I am her dad! Because a lot of girls say ‘No – call me mom’, and I guess it’s up to you, but you’re not REALLY the mother. Who is the real mother?”*

Helen echoed a similar sentiment in keeping the title of father with her teenage children. Her children called her “Dad” both at home and in public settings. I asked her what she would prefer to be called, and her reply was:

*“I would prefer...and I’ve really thought about that a lot – and came to the conclusion I was never adamant about it. Whatever they feel comfortable. As long as...and it’s...as long as those words are endearing and not meant to be in a mean way.”*

Helen actually felt a lot of support from her children and counted them as a major support in her life. She recalled the following story during an interview:

*“The most wonderful experience I ever had in this whole process was – the night when I first presented [as female] inside the home, we were watching a movie. Lindsey and my*

*daughter got up to either go to the bathroom or get popcorn or something, and Will and I were sitting across from each other, and he saw the fear or anxiety in me - I assume - saw the anxiety and fear in me, got up from the couch, didn't say a word, and just hugged me."*

Paul, a transman whose son currently resides with grandparents several states away, was also holding on to his original parenting title in interactions with his child.

*"He calls me 'Momma', yeah. I told him he could call me Momma 'til the day he dies, and he said, 'Okay.' He's fifteen and hates the world right now."*

Kathleen has teenage sons who both call her "Dad". She echoes Terri's tension between the public and private terms of address for herself as a parent.

*"I've told them that I'm still their father, and that will never change. But they need to understand, too, that the rest of the world sees me as a woman, and my name is Kathleen. And you know - I'm not necessarily their 'father' in the real world, but I'm more their 'parent'."*

When I asked her what she would prefer to be called, she answered:

*"I don't know. I don't know. To say that they have 'two moms'. I don't want to confuse them any more than they are. If they feel like it at some point down the road, they're more than welcome, but I'm not going to press them with those sorts of things."*

Claire has three older children, who learned of her gender identity when they were adults. She also didn't feel that she would ever be a 'mother' to them. When we discussed what her daughter (who currently resides in the family home) calls her, she stated,

*“Sometimes she calls me Dad, sometimes Claire. I don’t know that I’ll ever be mom...I mean she already has a mom, so think to extend that would be difficult to her.”*

What we can see from all of these reflections on parenting and gender transition is that the categories of ‘mother’ and ‘father’ may prove to be the most difficult to change in the realm of kinship labels. There is something deeply rooted in the terms designated for each parent, and simply taking on the gender of the opposite parenting role does not seem to be enough to claim the title. Why do fathers remain “Dad” even after becoming women, and mothers remain “Mama” even after becoming men? While examining both marriage and parenting through the lens of gender transition, we can observe that kinship is dynamic and driven by individual family interactions and choices. However, certain terms are so strongly grounded in history, roles, and responsibilities that switching over proves extremely difficult, if not impossible. A father cannot easily become a mother, nor can a husband seamlessly become a wife. The way we view ourselves as kin, and the way our kin view us, is grounded in more than gender. Kinship systems in the United States have specific divisions of power, rights, and obligations that are often dispersed along gender lines. The expectations of a ‘husband’ are different than the expectations of a ‘wife’, and the expectations of a ‘mother’ are different than the expectations of a ‘father’. Crossing these boundaries – especially in the domain of parenting roles - seemed to be a point of tension for many respondents. While they wanted to be fully recognized in their new gender, they could not fully adopt the gendered parenting roles such identity would imply. This tension and resistance hearkens to Yanagisako’s insistence that people tend to assume certain cultural practices of inequality and hierarchy tend to be perceived as the ‘natural order’ of things. She writes, “The natural order that people and institutions are perceived to reflect is sometimes construed as rooted in biology, sometimes as functional and rational, and sometimes as god-

given” (1995:x). In the case of parenting titles and roles, we can see all three perceptions at play simultaneously – making categories such as ‘fatherhood’ and ‘motherhood’ imbued with natural power and cultural weight that make the transition from one to another extremely challenging.

Interestingly, this resistance to shift from ‘father’ to ‘mother’ or vice versa seems to imply a view of ‘motherhood’ and ‘fatherhood’ as biologically grounded and static concepts without history or change. This view, of course, could not be further from the truth. Specific regimes of care and duties entailed by the title of ‘father’ or ‘mother’ can and do change historically – whether it be through shifts in public opinion, technological advances, or legislation. Familial roles that may upon first glance appear constant are prone to changes in meaning historically, politically, and additionally along generational lines. As Rapp asserts in her analysis of gender and politics in Euro-American kinship, the entire kinship system is heavily grounded in terminology distinguishing gender and generation. She notes “Euro-American family life defines the intersection of gender and generation. It provides a language linking sex and age groups in patterns of hierarchy and dependence, authority and obedience, spoken in the etiquette of generosity and responsibility” (1987:124). Godelier (2012) notes that while the marital axis of the conjugal family has weakened over time, the axis of filiation is much more firmly rooted. He argues, however, that even firmly grounded filiation is prone to change historically. If technology has separated kinship from the biological domains of fertilization, gestation, and even gender, the question of authenticity as a parent becomes foregrounded. Who becomes the ‘real’ mother, or the ‘real’ father? What does this authenticity entail? Respondents certainly voiced this tension, and the difficulties that come from symbolically organizing individuals into categories that were once grounded in the assumed ‘facts’ of biology. This language of gendered,

generational identity in kinship is embedded and infused with power relationships and familial expectations that prove as resistant to change as symbolically charged family placeholders.

### **An Analysis of Kinship, An Analysis of Power**

I began this initial chapter with an analysis of kinship, but will end it with an analysis of power. In my initial examination of how kinship terms and relationships change upon gender transition, I uncovered a wide variety of outcomes for various relationships. There was not a predictable template for the transition from ‘daughter’ to ‘son’, or from ‘husband to ‘wife’. Individual histories and family dynamics tended to have a significant outcome on the transformation of kin terms and the subsequent roles and relationships they structured for transpeople. Kinship ties tended to demonstrate a great deal of variety and flexibility in how they responded to categorical changes in gender. Sometimes, a husband easily became a wife. Other times, a husband became an estranged enemy. For some families, sons were easily incorporated as daughters; and for others, that incorporation was fraught with tension and resistance. The common thread that ran through the kinship narratives of transpeople included in this analysis was a marked shift in the power relations that were contained within a given kin relationship. Transitioning gender within a family revealed less about the symbolic categories of relatedness and the roles they entailed, and much more about the power dynamics embedded in familial relationships. When an individual revealed his or her gender identity to family members – regardless of which kinship category we examine - there was a suspension in the ability to ‘claim’ family ties. The moment of ‘coming out’ to family members signified the start of a liminal space, where the transperson no longer embodied their former kinship status and was not yet legitimated. During this liminal stage, transpeople handed power to the cisgender (non-transgender) family members; and the family members were viewed as the ones who would ultimately set the terms of the relationship.

The transperson could petition family members to accept their new gendered and relational identity, but they could not make claims to the title without the consent and cooperation of their fellow kin. As we shall see in a subsequent chapter on dignity and rights, there is a marked difference between ‘claiming’ and ‘petitioning’ – with the former being empowering, and the latter being disempowering.

What became evident in the analysis of kin ties for transpeople was, when an individual disrupts the gendered foundation upon which hierarchies rest, the power balance of relationships is removed from the status quo. That shift in power can have positive and nurturing outcomes, or negative and destructive outcomes. This is highly dependent on individual family and relational dynamics; and it requires a nuanced and in-depth examination of how individuals conceptualize their own role as kin, and their own relationship to power and control. It also became apparent, in a comparative analysis of kinship categories, that transgender people were more willing to endure painful interactions from people who fit within the standard notion of North American kinship (substance and code) than they would from those labeled as friends, allies, or acquaintances. This may not be surprising, but it does indicate the enduring power and control evoked by kin relationships and terminologies. Additionally, it is important to note that the relationships built within a kinship system are complex and based upon a great deal of history, trust, and emotional investment. For family members who learn of an individual’s gender identity, the road to acceptance and understanding can take time and be fraught with difficulty and complex feelings.

The transpeople with whom I spent time throughout the course of my fieldwork cherished their position as family members and valued their kinship relations. Traditionally recognized kin relationships - webs of association with mothers and fathers, sisters and brothers, sons and

daughters, aunts and uncles, husbands and wives – held the greatest imbalance of power relations. They also held a high likelihood of rejection, yet were simultaneously the relationships transpeople held as most important to them, and viewed as the most ‘authentic’ and ‘enduring’ relationships. In an examination of intimacy and care, strong relationships develop outside of officially recognized kinship categories, but are often viewed as secondary to the privileged place of kinship. In the following chapter, we will examine these ‘non-kin’ regimes of care, and the role they play in the daily lives of transpeople.

## **CHAPTER 2: LIKE FAMILY TO ME**

In the United States, kinship has remained deeply rooted in notions of shared history, built upon the foundations of substance and code. While the way we formulate both substance and code has shifted over time, they have normally been seen as prerequisites for kinship. This is not a universal case; and close bonds and relationships can be created on shared experience, care and nurturance, completely separate from kin ties. However, do they ever qualify as “authentic” connections? Are they relegated to a second-class status in the relationship hierarchy? Rapp shows that, in the West, the image of the male-headed nuclear family dominates the family domain and “all other kinship patterns are relegated to a lower status as extensions of or exceptions to the rule” (1987:125). This hierarchy of family forms, and the privileging of substance and code in kinship connections, determine how individuals conceptualize and create bonds outside of formally recognized kinship ties.

In this chapter, I explore how people create networks of care and intimacy that are effectively divorced from classical kinship. What do these bonds tell us about the connections we make and the way we view our identity in relation to others? What opportunities do alternative routes to kinship provide transgender individuals and their families; and what do these bonds tell us about changing notions of kin ties and the ways in which power impacts the relationships once thought to be situated “outside” of kinship’s door?

### **My Sibling from the Same Canoe**

In “What Kinship Is”, Marshall Sahlins highlights a form of post-natal kinship recognized by the Trukese, first described by Mac Marshall. In his account, two individuals who encountered a life-threatening experience while out to sea became linked through adversity and a shared life

experience. They are encompassed under the kinship category of “my sibling from the same canoe” (Sahlins 2013). In this form of post-natal reckoning, shared experience is equal to, or perhaps even more powerful than, shared substance in forming bonds and constructing the identity of self. Our life experiences often have more influence on our understanding of who we are than our biological understandings of where we originated. A shared history was, time and time again, brought up by respondents as central to forming bonds they labeled as kinship. Stazia outlined the importance of dedication and endurance in kinship as she stated: “*Kinship is relationships that matter. Not just trivial relationships, but the day to day hardcore relationships*”. Respondents noted that the people whom they counted as kin were there for the ups and the downs and proved to remain steadfast over long stretches of time. However, these kin were also closely linked to blood relationships. Parents, siblings, spouses, and children topped lists and definitions of kin and family members. Individuals were much less likely to count a friend or trans community member as kin, despite the fact that they shared many similar experiences – both triumphant and adverse. By all accounts, transgender people could often be considered “siblings from the same canoe” based on the difficulties of transitioning in a hostile and cruel world. However, “friends” and “kin” were often kept strictly separate in discussions. Whenever an individual was making a point to show affinity for friends or fellow community members, he or she used the term “like family”. This term is certainly loaded. It is bringing friends from support groups, conferences, and meetings into the fold of affinity normally reserved for kin relations, yet simultaneously keeps those friendships distinctly bounded in the cognitive realm of “like”. Many of these friendships provide substantial emotional support for transpeople; and at times, they even provide financial support. Often, if an individual experiences hardship or needs a place to stay, they are welcomed in the homes of their

transgender friends. They interact in ways that mirror family life, yet are not family without prefixes. These family forms come with a disclaimer. The need to justify relationships is just one illustration of the power that hegemonic notions of kinship (as manifested in law, media, and folk models) have on the day-to-day categorization of relationships.

*“The trans community has become a family to me. I feel very close to some of those people...as things have changed in my marriage and things that aren’t there...a certain closeness...that has changed and other things have started to fill some of that. Not in the same way, but being with people in the community – they’ve started to become my family.”* (Claire, 58)

*“I was reserving families for the special – like you and your three kids and your husband and stuff, but no...other kinds of families...yeah – my transfamily and then there’s also my work family at work.”* (Stazia, 61)

In Claire and Stazia’s quotes on how transgender group members mirror family relationships, it seems clear that relationships forged via time and care are still seen as secondary to formally recognized kin ties. Claire notes that the trans community provides a closeness – but not ‘in the same way’ as her marriage ties did. Stazia mentions that she reserves the term “family” for “special” kin ties, such as those between spouses, parents and children.

In her study of transgender practices of intimacy and care in the UK, Sally Hines noted that “the social marginalization of transgender cultures...can be seen to have led to particular practices of care” (2007:164). The question, however, is whether bonds that are forged under adversity prove to be stronger, more enduring, or more significant than formally recognized and legitimized family ties forged under the gradual process of shared time, substance and history.

For those who identify as transgender, there is no lack of adversity or negative life experiences to draw upon. However, no respondent seemed to count their relationships with other transpeople as full familial bonds, based solely upon adverse and negative experiences. These experiences were, as will be discussed in subsequent chapters, used to build a foundation for a social community to rally for action and political activism. One would not be able to make the case for adversity creating ties recognized as kinship by the transgender community. This might seem a dead end and non-starter; but the fact that friends and group members are held in such distinction from family members brings us to an important and essential examination of *what* exactly creates the bonds of kinship, and *if* those bonds are ever possible to truly sever once they are created. As Strathern notes in her analysis of kinship in England: “For English speakers, a peculiarity of knowing kinship terms is that information about origins is already grasped as knowledge. Parentage implies relatedness; facts about birth imply parentage, and people who find things out about their ancestry, and thus about their relations with others, acquire identity by that very discovery. The information constitutes what they know about themselves” (2005:69). This reluctance on the part of participants to classify community members as kin echoes Strathern’s analysis. Learning of a recognized kinship connection may create a relationship; but a relationship, in and of itself, will not lead to the creation of a kinship connection.

Strathern attributes this to the pseudo-scientific knowledge of what makes someone a relative. Shared genes are seen as the foundation for a powerful connection that automatically translates into relatedness and family ties. However, the historically recognized legal model of reproduction that once served as the foundation for creating kin ties is being challenged on a daily basis with advances in reproductive technology, adoption, and - of specific interest to this study – gender transition. New and novel forms of family building arise and challenge

hegemonic notions of family and relatedness. As Strathern argues, “the very nature of family changes historically” (2005:45). However, in the context of both traditional and alternative kin ties for transpeople, that change has proven to be quite slow and likely to meet many social, legal, and political roadblocks. Elizabeth Freeman asks if it is even possible for kinship theory to be queered. She notes that queer relationships “have not been, like the parent and child and the husband-wife unit, the basis of a system of interlocking, detachable, small-scale social units that can multiply across space into extended families, or through time into descent groups” (2007:296). Yet, according to Freeman, the stakes are high in having queer relationships incorporated into kinship theory. She notes that a culture’s repetition of particular practices end up producing what appear to be material facts that ground the practices in the first place; and when these repetitions are governed by a norm, “other possibilities are literally unthinkable and impossible” (2007: 297-298). Certainly, the norms that structure formal kinship relations in the United States are the result of repeated practices that have led to norms privileging heterosexual gender norms and families organized and anchored by socially and legally recognized and endorsed practices. Freeman calls for theorists to expand the notion of kinship and view it as “the process by which bodies and the potential for physical and emotional attachment are created, transformed, and sustained over time” (2007:298). While such an approach is theoretically appealing and would greatly expand opportunities for recognizing diverse family forms, it is also important to analyze how such bonds are created by queer individuals and are conceptualized in terms of kinship and family connections.

When the topic of care and nurturance was discussed during both interviews and informal conversations with transgender people, there was a noticeable tendency to create a sharp division between family and non-family relationships. “Family” remained a term that was reserved for

those whose connections could be traced to classic kinship ties. Relationships which were closer than friendship –yet not *really* family – seemed to create a tension and disconnect for people who were discussing their relationships during and after gender transition. “Friend” is the widely used term in our society for someone who becomes a part of our lives through care, compassion, and nurturance alone. If not socially or legally recognized, the relationship exists in a sort of limbo between imagination and reality – forever condemned to prefixes and explanatory labels. Someone can be *like* a sister to you but will never really be a sister without being able to trace the relationship through its proper socially recognized roots.

The cultural power of the biological grounding of family is highlighted by Anna Muraco in her study of fictive kin ties between friends. Muraco argues in her introduction: “There is a pervasive cultural belief that biological family connections are the most salient and durable bonds between individuals. They are reinforced through customs, ritual, and laws that privilege familial relationships over non-kin ties and determine who may be defined as family” (2006: 1313). There is not a term to distinguish between friends who provide casual social interaction and friends who play the role of family members – often filling in where formally recognized kin ties fall short. This lack of proper terminology is significant. As Andrew Solomon states in his book, *Far From the Tree*, “the absence of words is the absence of intimacy; these experiences are starved for language” (2012:5). This echoes Strathern’s assertion that “knowledge creates relationships; relationships come into being when knowledge does” (2005:70).

Until that knowledge of what makes an authentic kinship bond changes, and until terms denoting relationships that fall outside the dominant notions of what constitutes a relation are created, relationships forged through adversity, care and nurturance alone will be condemned to second-class status. While we observed the notion of a plastic kinship within the intimate sphere of

family, plasticity does not imply the ability to transfer kinship terms in a post-natal, friendship-based context. There seems to be a foundation upon which kin ties are built; and commonality of experience alone does not seem to be enough. The power of family and familial discourse comes from the collective regulation of and expectation for specific kinship roles. Muraco states that “family is a regulated social institution that is expected to provide material and social care and connection to its members” (2006:1314). In the absence of formally recognized family ties, some individuals create “fictive kin” or “intentional families” – networks of friends who provide these material and social supports to individuals who find themselves estranged from formal kin groups. Both Muraco (2006) and Weston (1991) outlined the process of fictive kinship for gay and lesbian men and women in San Francisco. They noted the strong tendency to reclassify friends as family, especially among those who were isolated from their natal kin groups. Sally Hines (2007) also noted that the “friendship ethic” provided an important structure to social networks that provided emotional support and care. In excerpts of friendship narratives during her interviews with transgender people in the UK, she notes that friends who were especially close were also likely to equate their relationship to mirroring familial ties. While Hines concludes that this indicates a similarity between ‘fictive kinship’ in lesbian and gay lives and “friends as family” in transgender practices of intimacy, the participants’ quotes she chose point to the distinct tension between labeling friends as family in my own discussions with transpeople about the role of friendship in their lives. One of Hines’ participants noted: “Things have been difficult with my parents and *in many ways*, my partner, my son and my friends are my family now.” Another participant stated: “My friends have *effectively* become my family.” (2007:154 [emphasis added]). While these quotes may initially seem to support the conclusion that friends become family for transpeople, a nuanced examination of how transpeople experience

relationships and connections reveals a clear distinction between family and *like family*. When friends were equated to family, there was always a word or phrase to set them apart.

“Effectively” my family, “in many ways” they are my family, “like” my family – all indicate a tendency to set friends and family into two distinct categories. These precursors were not necessarily evident in studies of gay and lesbian fictive kinship networks.

I questioned people on this distinction between friends and family during my fieldwork, since the literature frequently exemplifying ‘fictive kin’ in lesbian and gay lives did not seem to apply as smoothly to transgender experiences of care and intimacy. People with whom I spoke would often remark that they viewed the transgender collective, in and of itself, as a temporary and goal-oriented community. Some respondents observed that people became engaged with other transpeople as they set out on a journey to transform their gender, but contact seemed to diminish as individuals became comfortable in their new identity and began to “go stealth”. “Going stealth” is a term that indicates an individual’s wish to be recognized as a member of the opposite gender rather than remaining visible as a transperson. Many individuals who were regulars at support groups and community organization meetings would eventually stop attending, never to be seen again. That lack of continuity may be a part of the resistance to label fellow travelers on the transition journey as kin.

The ties of kinship, as we have outlined, imply something more enduring - something that lasts even in the absence of physical proximity or regular interaction. A son may decide to cut off contact with his mother upon revelation of her new gender identity; but there is still a recognized kinship tie on a multitude of levels. A parent-child bond is recognized both formally and informally, in both the social and legal spheres of life. There are certain rights and obligations a mother has toward her son that can be enforced on multiple levels. Alternatively, a close bond

can be formed between two members of a support group (arguably a closer bond than that of siblings); but if contact between those two members ceases, there is no longer a recognized tie.

### **Caring and Being Cared For**

At the core of kinship narratives in this study is the notion of caring and being cared for. Care, seems like an ephemeral concept. It cannot be tracked in the neat charts, lists and diagrams that have historically characterized kinship studies. However, if we wish to understand the connections and bonds that pull individuals together in what Sahlins described as “mutuality of being” – of having an interest and investment in the life of another that is as strong as the interest and investment we have in our own - we must address the notion of caring. If we do this, we begin to see the very foundation upon which notions of affinity and connection become part of an ongoing process of self-discovery and self-identification. In a neolocal society made up of economically independent individuals living in nuclear families, Ego reigns as king (or queen) with the ability to maintain or sever relationships based on their viability and mutual benefit. For individuals who transition from one gender to another, the very notion of “self” is temporarily suspended and liminal. There are drastic shifts in self-perception and core identity. Gender identity and gender presentation must be merged through a process of revelation and negotiation. Through the process of coming out to friends and family, and renegotiating relationships on both a symbolic and affective level, the very notion of being and the very concept of “mutuality of being” must be severed and then reconnected. It is only through the new lens of self that one can conceptualize the new patterns of care and affection that will characterize kinship. Intersubjectivity becomes central to understanding the bonds created via kinship. As Borneman states in his analysis on ethics and kinship: “Care is ‘unlike’ dignity, where the ‘I’ addresses itself to the same ‘I’ and it is unlike the life of the mind, where the ‘I’

addresses itself to more or less numerous ‘they’s’ who remain anonymous and no longer part of a present and ongoing dialogue. In caring, the ‘I’ addresses itself to one or several individual ‘you’s’ – in other words, to particular human beings with whom there has been established a relationship of reciprocity, a possibility of a reversal of roles” (2006:43). If we are to take this approach to kinship ties and caring, do we limit the scope of who can be classified as kin too narrowly? Is a narrow interpretation more applicable to how individuals envision kinship in their own lives?

We may once again return to Sahlins’ assertion that kinsmen “live each other’s lives and die each other’s deaths”, as we examine the notion of “Transgender Kinship” at the community level, with a focus placed on care and caring. Do members of various transgender groups care about one another? In many ways, yes. Do members of transgender groups consider one another kin? This is a much more difficult assertion to make. In many ways, individuals who consider themselves transgender do, indeed, live each other’s lives in terms of shared experiences and shared struggles. As Claire noted in her interview: *“I think the thing that’s been good about the community is there are finally people I can be with who ‘get it’...who understand me, and I understand them.”* She added that during a recent support group meeting, stories were being exchanged about the struggles of being transgender. She noted that a profound realization, for her, was that she was the only one in the room who had not seriously attempted suicide. Later in the interview, however, she admitted that the thought had crossed her mind multiple times prior to gender transition. These shared understandings, struggles, and journeys were echoed by many individuals with whom I spoke as we discussed the benefits of support groups and conferences. In the same way that transgender people may live each other’s lives, they also die each other’s deaths – at least, in the symbolic sense. One of the most significant examples of this can be

found in the ceremonies surrounding the Transgender Day of Remembrance. The Transgender Day of Remembrance (TDOR) is an annual event taking place on November 20<sup>th</sup>, which memorializes those who were lost to anti-transgender violence. Vigils are held around the country – somber ceremonies where the names of individuals who were killed by gender-based violence that year are read aloud, often with the way in which they were killed. Ceremonies that I attended also included non-denominational prayers, video montages, and personal speeches from members of the community and individuals from various organizations supportive of transgender causes. The focus of the evening, regardless of where one attends a TDOR ceremony, is placed squarely upon remembering the dead and raising awareness of the fragility (and unfortunately, often invisibility) of transgender lives. Tears, solemnity, and reflection characterize the evening. Participants mourn the loss of individuals they never met. The mourning, however, cannot be dismissed as anything other than authentic and moving. Participants in the ceremony honor the dead and, in essence, ‘die’ their deaths.

Another anecdote occurred while I was conducting fieldwork and attending monthly meetings for a transgender support group. There had been a young transperson who began attending meetings with his father, seeking support and guidance as he navigated the complex world of gender transition. After a brief absence, the group learned that the young man had committed suicide. The visceral reaction of the group members, the support that they showed the bereaved family, and the tears that were shed in subsequent meetings all pointed to the notion that, although the young man had only been a group member for a short time, the reverberations of his death were significant. Indeed, the group had died his death.

Often, in studies of non-heterosexual practices of care, relationships are studied outside of the sphere of kinship, focusing heavily on individually created and innovatively crafted

relationships. Many scholars (Borneman 2001, Hine 2006, Weeks et. Al 2001, Weston 1991) criticize the focus on traditionally recognized kin relationships as too narrow and not applicable to studies of queer or non-heterosexual practices of care. Beyond critiquing the narrow scope of kinship, there is the view that such an angle of analysis serves only to privilege communal reproduction above all other forms of union and all other relationships. In Borneman's analysis on the ethics of kinship, he notes that "kinship diagrams are usually employed to create a representation of permanence and continuity, a wholeness and completeness that constantly denies death as it reaffirms perpetual life in a series of equivalent heterosexual unions organized by marriage" (2001: 39). He shows that this view of kinship leaves out the many radical ways in which individuals rearrange social structure to invent alternative possibilities of affiliation. His ethnographic study focuses on the strategies for recognition of same-sex partners in East Berlin. In his description, same sex couples used adoption ties, legally binding themselves as parent and child in the legal system to receive recognition of their intimate relationship, since marriage ties between partners of the same sex were illegal. Borneman points to an important shift that must occur in anthropology's analysis of kinship and how we reckon relatedness. He states that "anthropology's quest for a regulative ideal for humanity has involved the repression of care and the privileging of forms of communal reproduction. Anthropology should instead privilege the analysis of caring and being cared for as a process of non-coercive, voluntary affiliation" (2001: 30-31).

Legal, academic, and social understandings of family and kinship must be broadened to recognize "relationships that matter" as the foundation for building care and nurturance networks, whether such relationships are rooted in classic kinship ties or forged outside of them. The prominent privileging of traditional kinship ties, rooted in substance and code, are

unquestionably evident in both the narratives of my respondents and in the statements of other individuals regarding family and kinship. On both the macro and micro levels of analysis, ties rooted in shared history, genetics and alliance are viewed as stable, enduring and predictable. The strength of traditional kinship constructions is likely due to the official recognition and prominence of the forms in both legal and social spheres.

As we move to relationships based solely on care and intimacy, there are not the same cultural scripts guiding relationships. Innovation and flexibility take center stage, which provides both limitless possibility and incredible insecurity. This is what led Muraco to assert that “friendship is, at once, the most flexible and most tenuous of social relationships” (2006:1313). We additionally walk a fine line when we tout the novelty of queer family formation, between recognizing and promoting diverse family forms, and making individuals in non-heterosexual or transgender families as “outside kinship’s door”, portraying their intimate connections in ways that render them unrecognizable to those who conceptualize family and kinship as valid only in the realm of substance and code. As we shall see in later chapters, being associated as *part of* a kinship system rather than *apart from* a kinship system plays an important role in humanizing and empowering marginalized populations – including transgender people.

Individuals often conceptualize ties forged outside of traditionally recognized kin relationships as less stable and less enduring. The problem with this cycle, however, is that it becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. Relationships forged outside of the socially and legally mitigated spheres of marriage and descent lack rights and recognition granted to married couples and relatives. This lack of rights leads to insecurity, and often the instability expected. Respondents with whom I spoke found friendship and community ties to be important aspects of their identity and well-being, but they minimized these relationships in their narratives. Participants were much more

focused on acceptance from natal family members, spouses and children than that from their friends or community members. Even though, many times, friends and community members had proven to be more accepting and affirming; and there was a more equal distribution of power within the relationships. In order to understand how informal relationships function in terms of connection, caring and intimacy, we must understand how they are lived and experienced in the context of the formally recognized kinship network. While some may argue that kin-based relationships are assigned and care-based relationships are chosen' by examining both in conjunction, it is observable that there is significant choice in both realms; and making distinctions between community, friendship and kinship is more difficult than one might expect.

### **The Role of Friendship in Transgender Lives**

Friendship is an area of care and intimacy that took an important role in the lives of many respondents, and it provided a unique social bond that was described as both affirming and enduring. In societies where identity formation and social interaction often take place outside of the kinship sphere, it becomes central to look at friendship and the significant role it plays in people's lives. If we are to divide this work between community and kinship it is the realm of friendship that illustrates how very arbitrary such a distinction is when attempting to analyze and articulate how individuals make connections that matter. In her analysis of anthropological studies of friendship, Sandra Bell (1999) notes that because kinship in "open" societies such as the United States is organized multilaterally, we have a vast array of possible kin to "choose" from. In this way, kinship is like friendship due to the fact that it is, to a large extent, a matter of choice. However, friendship is still the lesser understood and least analyzed realm of care. While kin have titles and webs of shared substance and historical continuity, friends do not have specific titles and are often seen as temporary relationships without set limits or boundaries. For

individuals who find themselves rejected from or situated outside of their natal kin groups, however, friendship can prove to be an essential lifeline to connecting with people who matter. Bell asserts that it would be a mistake to privilege consanguine relationships over friendship in kinship studies. Certainly, as we have seen from transgender kinship narratives, there is no guarantee that kin relationships will prove enduring or that friendships will prove fleeting. Both depend upon acts of care that maintain the bonds and ties. Examining friendship in the context of transgender lives additionally shows how important and essential it is to recognize and value bonds formed outside of substance and code relationships, in order to fully validate and represent the diverse manifestations of kinship, community and connections for all types of families. The tendency of participants to relegate their friendship connections to secondary status is likely tethered to the reluctance of social and legal institutions to formally acknowledge and mark the strength of affective friendship. With increased understanding of the strength friendship ties can provide, there eventually may be less of a marked delineation between family and friendship ties in both social and legal conceptualizations of care and intimacy and a greater tendency to feel that friendship is on equal footing with kinship.

While kinship titles provide a sense of grounding, place and identity for people, friendship also serves an essential role in how we see ourselves in relation to the larger society. The types of friends we keep, the way we maintain friendship bonds, and the experiences we share with companions all provide insight as to how we perceive others as well as ourselves. In the introduction to *The Anthropology of Friendship*, Bell discusses friendship as a “new frontier” for anthropological study, essential for understanding how people create social connections that are both meaningful and dynamic. Friendship is often seen as more volatile and less stable over time than kinship ties. However, it would be erroneous to make this assumption. After all, as Bell

discusses, “in ‘open’ societies, where kinship is organized multilaterally, the number of possible kin to be drawn upon beyond the elementary family is very large. Kinship becomes like friendship in that it is personal and to some extent a matter of choice” (1999:7-8). As we have seen in this chapter, kinship can indeed mirror friendship. What we must now ask is if friendship can mirror kinship. Is there even an important distinction to make? As Allan (1989) reminds us, even friendship is not as free from societal constraints as one might assume. Friendship connections have proven to be constrained by a variety of class, ethnicity, age, gender, and geographical factors. The friendship narratives of the individuals with whom I spoke were often dominated by friendships found within the transgender community. However, several individuals found their closest ties in childhood friends. These friendships arguably had just as much history and temporality as any kinship tie outlined. However, whether respondents were discussing friendships forged decades earlier or friendships only recently developed, there remained a separation between friends and family that points to the tenuousness of friendship relative to kin ties.

Terri grew up very close to a neighborhood family with children around her age. The friendship spanned decades, and s/he used “like family” to describe the relationship. This points to the potential for strong and enduring bonds to develop through initial friendship, strengthened by time and frequency of contact.

*“I kind of became like a – another member of that family. I spent more time over that house than I did mine...and it grew larger and larger in my life as I grew older. All the way up through high school. And I still maintain a close relationship with the family – still do.”*

Teri had revealed hir gender identity to the members of the family she was close to, and they accepted hir without significant conflict or fracture of the relationship. Even close, affirming, and enduring friendships, however, still took on the prefix of “like” when it came to placing friends in the context of family.

Helen had a childhood friendship, but hers became more distant once she began presenting as a female.

*“I did keep one very close friend that literally we were introduced as infants, and we still...subsequently he has yet to see the new me, but we do speak on the phone. We’ve been speaking for several years now, and we do every two months now.”*

I asked if it was because of distance that they had not yet met face to face. Helen noted that he lived nearby, but she believed he was nervous to see her presenting as female. In this example, we see that the length of the friendship does not necessarily predict the support one can draw from it during and after gender transition.

The vast majority of friendships that people considered major sources of support and comfort were acquired during and after transition. Some of these friendships were with other transgender people, and others were not. Stazia’s closest friends were people she encountered within the transgender community. Her best friend was another transwoman who she met by attending local support group meetings. At the time of the interview, she met her friend at least twice a week for dinner and coffee; and they remained a source of emotional support for one another. Stazia also considered several of her coworkers to be friends, as well as a non-trans boyfriend. However, these relationships did not prove to be as enduring or affirming for her. Terri also found a great deal of support through friendship with other transpeople. S/he noted the power of

friendships acquired post-transition that were not a major part of her daily life but still remained strong.

*“A number of those people are really close friends of mine, and it’s nice because for the last fifteen years I’ve been going to the Twila Gala and you show up, and your friendship picks up like THAT (snaps fingers)”.*

Claire also found a tremendous amount of support from friendships with other transpeople. She noted that friendship ties helped supplement the deterioration of intimacy in her marriage that came about after gender transition.

*“I think part of it, as things have changed in my marriage, and things that aren’t there – a certain closeness...that has changed and other things have started to fill some of that. Not in the same way, but being with people in the community – they’ve started to become my family.”*

Again, we see the flowing of terminology blurring the lines of friendship, kinship, and community.

While extensive examinations of the cultural scripts guiding kin relationships and their mutual rights and obligations have been undertaken, less literature exists on the cultural scripts guiding the ways in which we structure friendship. Friendship is understandably more flexible and innovative in nature than kin ties, and it is often cited by respondents as supplementing kin relationships in essential ways. Friendship narratives during my fieldwork strengthened Sandra Bell’s argument that friendship serves as “a site of identity formation that mediates, often ambiguously, between constraint and creativity (or at least flexibility) in the formation of social ties” (1999:16). From examining the friendship narratives of transgender people, we can see the

tremendous flexibility, range and innovation they hold. From enduring childhood relationships, to new acquaintances with similar interests and goals, the title of friendship encompasses a vast array of relationships. While participants drew much support and positivity from their friendship with other transgender people, they did not necessarily equate friendship with community involvement. At the same time, individuals were hesitant to consider friendship as fulfilling the same function as kinship; and they refrained from considering friends indistinguishable from kin. Friendship was seen as a category separate from kinship and interest groups, yet that distinction proved arbitrary when discussing the details of the relationships and the purposes they served in participants' lives.

It leads us to question the utility of “fictive kinship” (Gittins 2010, Rapp 1980, Weston 1991), a term often of focus when examining queer families in a wide variety of contexts. Fictive kinship, defined as the process through which friends become family, does not seem to resonate with transgender participants and does not seem to resonate with the lived experiences of their relationships. If we are to study how friends become family, it should be just as essential to understand how family become friends. These processes of friends becoming “like family” and family becoming “like friends” are not, as one would assume from the literature, limited to LGBTQ families. The complexity of friendship and family ties is equally pertinent to all family types; and categories of kinship, community and friendship appear to remain discreetly bounded regardless of the gender identity, sexuality or composition of the relationship in question. In the context of the friendships detailed above, and holding to the notion that friendship and kinship are both separate but important manifestations of care and identity, it would be more pertinent to examine how each relationship supplements and compliments the other, and how changes in one

sphere –such as kinship – may lead to changes in another sphere such as friendship or community connections.

### **Blood, Water, and Hierarchies**

In this chapter, we examined the many dimensions of caring and intimacy through the lens of relationships that are often situated outside of kinship and inside the realm of friendship. The multitude of transformations undergone in the context of personal relationships, as an individual undergoes gender transition, is multifaceted and complex; and they impact every single interpersonal relationship. As we noted in the previous chapter outlining gender transition in the context of kinship ties, the “authentic self” must be revealed time and time again through rehearsed narratives, opening one up to the reactions (and possible rejection) of parents, lovers, children, and friends. Coming out stories, in the context of kin relationships, were often preceded by anxiety, shame and guilt. Uncertainty and vulnerability characterized the situation, as transgender participants awaited the reaction of their family members. These reactions varied from supportive to cruel; but they all shared an asymmetrical balance of power, where the family member had the choice to accept or reject their relative after learning of his or her gender identity. It was nearly universal to find that the impetus was upon the transgender family member to provide information, promises and reassurance to family members, and to perform what Hines has described as “kin keeping”. While family member reactions varied significantly, depending upon individual and family dynamics specific to each narrative, each family member had the power to choose how to react to the new information, which terms and pronouns they wished to address their family member with, and whether or not they wanted to continue the relationship. These same power imbalances, however, were not evident in friendship narratives - regardless of whether the friendships were established before or after gender transition, and

whether the friendship was found inside or outside the transgender community. This points to the power of kin relationships, titles and symbols, and the power asymmetry that individuals are willing to endure in order to maintain and sustain kinship ties. Friendships were seen as lasting only long enough for the associations to be mutually beneficial for both individuals involved. If one party decided to cease contact, the bond of friendship could be temporarily suspended or severed altogether. If a friend was not receptive to an individual's gender transition, that friendship could end communication ceased. There was the possibility for new friendships to develop in the future. There was a comparative ease of breaking ties and replacing relationships that could not be applied to kinship.

A pure relationship, according to Giddens, is one in which "a social relation is entered into for its own sake, for what can be derived by each person from a sustained association with another; and which is continued only insofar as it is thought by both parties to deliver enough satisfaction for each individual to stay within it" (1993:58). Can such a relationship exist between kinsmen?

What we see from transgender kinship narratives is that the imbalance of power, created when an individual transitions gender, often becomes so great that the relationship cannot be considered a relationship of equals. According to Giddens, the pure relationship "is a relationship of equals, where each party has equal rights and obligations. In such a relationship, each person has respect, and wants the best for the other. The pure relationship is based upon communication, so that understanding the other person's point of view is essential" (2003:62). Where we often find these pure relationships is not in the realm of kinship but in the realm of friendship. For transgender people, pure relationships are located squarely in relationships of care and intimacy achieved outside of traditional kinship networks. However, these pure relationships are not imbued with the same social, cultural and legal weight as formally recognized kinship ties. The

pure relationship, however, is not the only relationship in which one can be situated and recognized. While queer-friendly models of kinship often advocate for the examination of affective ties formed outside traditional kinship networks, to truly understand the ways in which sexual and gender minorities make meaningful connections, such a project runs the risk of rendering invisible their relationships with and existence within traditional kinship networks. As we shall see in later chapters, being situated outside of traditional kinship networks has serious consequences for the recognition of humanity and dignity for transpeople. It also presents the risk of ignoring relationships that, while not necessarily balanced in power or positive in nature, constitute important relationships in the context of transgender lives.

John Borneman urges anthropologists to focus on relationships rooted in “processes of non-coercive, voluntary affiliation” (2001:31). For many transgender people, those voluntary affiliations are not in kin groups but in friendships with other transpeople. As we have seen in this chapter, and as we shall see in the next chapter, these community connections do not prove to be adequate substitutes for kinship connections. Even though friendships and involvement in community groups prove to be the best source of balanced and “pure” relationships, participants unequivocally found more meaning, purpose and comfort in relationships traditionally classified under kinship: relationships with parents, spouses and children proved to be the most contentious yet also most valued. The symbolic and social power of formally recognized kin ties, rooted in substance and code is undeniable when examining the relationships of transgender people; and it mirrors larger society and its privileging of recognized kin ties in both formal and informal channels. Whether examining family legislation or popular media, the power of family and marriage reinforces and strengthens the belief that “blood is thicker than water” and that kinship ties are enduring and unbreakable (even when, time and time again, they prove that they are not

either). What are the shortcomings of group connections in reaffirming identity and providing a sense of “home” for transgender people? In the following chapter, we will examine how people view themselves in relationship to other transgender people, and how that identification shapes their individual identities on an individual and collective level.

### CHAPTER 3: TRANSGENDER CONNECTIONS

Rhoda and I sat at the far end of the rectangular table, which served as a meeting hub in the health center's cafeteria. The monthly support group meeting had just concluded; and most people were shuffling about, preparing to drive home for the evening. "If you have a chance, you should check out the *Society of Care* group meeting in Oxford this Saturday," she remarked. "It's got a much different vibe than this place." Her statement intrigued me, and I asked her for clarification. "You'll just have to see it for yourself," she said, penning down the address and a few parking instructions. I thanked her and told her I would see her on Saturday. A few days later, I found myself walking up a dark path into a small, unremarkable meeting hall. I was early but not alone. Several people sat outside smoking, waiting for the meeting time. Right away, I knew Rhoda was right. The attire of the women sitting outside was much more formal and dramatic than what I had typically observed in the monthly support group meetings. Upon entering, the atmosphere was buzzing with energy and excitement. There was a dressing room where people could try on different dresses and shoes. There were people rushing from place to place, shouting to one another and laughing. I sat at a table to wait for the meeting to begin and began chatting with some of the attendees. Conversations were much more boisterous, and the crowd was significantly louder. During introductions, there were a wide variety of gender identities expressed, with people at different "stages" of transition. Some individuals were living full time in the gender of their choice. Others were only accustomed to dressing for these meetings. What struck me most about the meeting that evening was not the contrast between the two groups but the contrast I had witnessed *within* both groups. When originally mapping out my research project, I searched for "sites of community" where transgender-identified people congregated to create and form a sense of communal purpose. Yet, what I began to notice was

that a “community” created under the banner of “transgender” would not be as easy to pinpoint as I originally anticipated. As I examined the notion of collectivity in the context of identity for transgender participants, in both interviews and support groups, it became clear that the “transgender community” did not serve as the foundation where individuals grounded their identity. Valentine asserts that, when examining the mosaic of transgender conferences, events and support groups, what emerges is not a pre-existing community but instead is “a variety of dispersed places which are brought together by ‘transgender’ into an idea of community” (2007:72). Even the notion of community was contested by the people I spoke with in interviews and meetings. Very little overall support was found from collective transgender groups; and most if not all individuals were hesitant to foreground their transgender identity in daily interactions. Transpeople sought out support from other transgender friends rather than from support groups. This points to the need for more sophisticated notions of subjectivity, agency, identity, and social networks when exploring transgender lives.

The notion that identity-based collectives are ephemeral and fraught with tension does not come as a surprise. The elusive nature of “transgender” as a site of collective identity and group formation has been detailed by other anthropologists and sociologists (Hines 2007, Valentine 2007). In the introduction to his 2007 ethnography, *Imagining Transgender: An Ethnography of a Category*, Valentine writes of the difficulties of situating fieldwork around a category of identity, unbound by a physical site. By attending support meetings, clinics, workshops and local bars, he attempts to uncover various sites of collective identity and political activism. He finds that often, association and collaboration with other transgender people is solely available to those with the resources to access it. There are many people who we would lump beneath the umbrella term of “transgender” who do not identify themselves as such, or do not have access to

community sites for a variety of reasons. Valentine worked in New York City and traveled to these various points of community on a bicycle. My fieldwork in Connecticut and Massachusetts formed a very similar collage of social gatherings in churches, cafeterias, and meeting halls. Each site was far removed from the other, situated along vast stretches of highway – cars replacing bikes. With little public transportation available in these rural settings, access to each site became even more limited and exclusive-leaving me, as a researcher, to wonder who is being left out of the collective groups’ discourse altogether. The individuals who are able to attend meetings and participate in discussions are the ones who set the tone and agenda for the group itself and the identities it encompasses. These multiple, small scale interactions set the stage for larger, collective conceptualizations of what it means to be transgender in both local, national, and even global contexts. If we are to understand the nuanced relationships between the collective group and identity, we must understand the power of participation and the significance of simply “showing up”.

Even among those with access to transportation to the meeting sites, and social networking tools to inform them about gatherings, each subsequent meeting site that I attended highlighted the collective diversity of transgender demographics. In various groups and organizations that rallied under the banner of gender variance, one could find individuals with diverse cultural and social identities, often only united by their non-normative gender identity. Can we truly speak to the existence of a collective and cohesive transgender “community”? How do people view themselves in relation to others who identify as transgender? For individuals who find themselves outside the fold of formally recognized kin, can relationships forged with other transgender people replace lost connections? As we shall see in this chapter, it is difficult to pin

down the parameters of a transgender “community”; and it is even more difficult to find consensus on what that collective organization might offer in terms of resources or support.

### **Troubling Membership**

Before we can discuss the dynamics of “transgender” as a site for collectivity and group identity, and what it means to the participants in this study, we must examine what uniting under a common banner of gender identity entails. Many of the individuals who end up labeled by the term “transgender” and assumed to be part of the ‘transgender’ group do not necessarily perceive themselves to be a cohesive union. They often share little more than a gender identity that does not match the one assigned to them at birth. They have markedly different histories, beliefs and daily struggles. Does a comprehensive and collective transgender collective exist? Valentine asserts that “a transgender community does not exist outside the context of those very entities which are concerned to find a transgender community” (2007:68). He insists that transgender identity and community must be contextualized in a specific historical and ethnographic framework, which examines the holistic process of building a group . In the “work” of group building, there are certainly the hope for a commonality and the belief that there is a special, unspoken connection between participants – even if they have no shared interests beyond the singular dimension of gender identity. Certainly, some individuals with whom I spoke made statements that support this notion – the notion that transpeople somehow “know” one another in ways that people who are not trans-identified cannot. Overwhelmingly, participants referred to the transgender support groups and organizations they participated in as the “transgender community”.

Teri, who identifies as gender fluid, and is active in organizing activities for transgender participants, noted:

*“There’s something really special about the trans community – because we’re all hiding this secret – or we’re trying to figure out the same things and struggling with the same issues, and even though we all have our own stories, there are commonalities between them. So I realized that I could meet someone for the very first time and have these very honest and deep and personal conversations with them because they were an ally and you felt comfortable talking to them, and even though there is an anonymity there, you just couldn’t have the same conversation with a spouse or a parent or a friend for a number of reasons. So a number of the people I met in the trans community actually became very very close and central, and I have to say that some of my closest friends – I have to say more of my closest friends are trans than cis people”*

Claire, who identifies as female, echoed a similar sentiment, stating that associations with other transgender people allowed for association with others who “get” what it means to be transgender. For Claire, the connections to other transgender-identified individuals were sufficient to constitute a cohesive network of support and affirmation. She later remarked that the relationships she forged with other members of the groups she attended were starting to fulfill emotional voids left by the deterioration of her marital relationship, upon revealing her gender identity to her spouse. Both Terri and Claire found individual fulfillment in the existence of transgender unity and do not feel constrained or limited by the parameters of what it meant to be a group member. Tina, the mother of a FTM (female to male) youth noted that support group meetings were the only site where she and her son could feel comfortable expressing their authentic identities.

*“They get it, and you don’t always have to try to prove yourself, which is an issue outside of the community. With some people there’s a constant need for proving who you are.”*

This sentiment of feeling part of a larger collective, and being comforted in the feeling that one is “not alone”, was echoed by nearly all respondents in their discussions on interactions with other transpeople, in various sites of community. Valentine asserts that the idea of a coherent and unified identity group is part of anthropology’s “classic imaginary”. Vered Amit (2002) also suggests that anthropologists have been slow to give up the “anchorage of collectivity or community” – especially in an increasingly “placeless” anthropology. Yet, as we can see, that notion of unity and coherence is powerful and extends beyond social science and into the day to day realities of transgender individuals themselves, as they strive to build, sustain, challenge and find their place in relationships with other transgender people.

Group membership is inextricably tied to the interactions and discourses that shape which characteristics a “member” should possess, and how members should conduct themselves both within the group and in their interactions with larger society. Groups, after all, can only exist when members come into contact with non-members. If we seek to understand what it means to be a member of transgender groups and organizations, we must examine how discourse creates the boundaries that will serve to set limits on who is a member, or who “fits the mold”. For those who are situated in the category of gender minorities, the boundaries of transgender identity have largely been shaped and created by medical, political, and legal discourse. These narratives and definitions, in turn, serve to ‘set the conditions’ for group membership (Denny 2006, Mackenzie 1994, Namaste 2000, Valentine 2007). There is power in creating identity discourse; and the construction of a collective criteria for inclusion in the group will inevitably exclude certain identities while privileging others. Ekins and King discuss the creation of an

“acceptable face” for trans identities that privilege gender over sexuality. They suggest that the acceptable face for trans identity was created via a “symbiotic relationship between ‘experts’ and ‘members’” (2010: 26) and serves to set the foundational understanding of transgender identity. The acceptable face should solicit the correct amounts of sympathy and helplessness, often leaving transgender people -as a collective - portrayed as either pathological (via medical definitions) or oppressed (via political and legal definitions). David Valentine’s analysis of discourse and representation of transgender identity categorizes the pathologization of trans identity as “representational violence” (2006: 33). Representational violence is a skewed or flawed picture painted of a group or community by those who have the power to craft discourse; and it is a way to fit individuals, who do not conform to the expected binary categories of gender expectations, into new categories of exclusion. It is another way to make individual bodies subjects rather than actors in their own dramas. The tendency of social and political activists, lobbying for transgender rights, has been to frame the discourse around the victimization of transgender people – revealing stories of oppression, rejection, and physical harm to mobilize support, action and legislation designed to protect them. In doing this, Valentine argues that the entire notion of a transgender collective is firmly rooted in a discourse of violence (2006: 31).

This depiction of transgender identity as rooted in struggle and oppression came up throughout my fieldwork, and in personal conversations, workshops and support group meetings. One poignant example came during the UCONN Health and Law Conference, where M. Dru Levasseur, an attorney specializing in transgender issues, spoke of his own “second coming out”, where he admitted to himself and others that he was transgender. Initially identifying as a lesbian, Mr. Levasseur recalled, when he began to identify as transgender, that his initial thought was: “Oh – I’m mentally ill now that I’m trans.” (Transgender Lives 2012) While this

recollection was told with a bit of humor, Dru's story was received with empathetic nods and laughter from the audience. The laughter, however, spoke to a much more serious issue surrounding the personal impacts of taking on a stigmatized identity and becoming part of an identity group collectively rooted in discourses of oppression, discrimination, and pain.

Negative experiences and pain were brought up on small and large scales during support group meetings, as members discussed both politics and individual stories of struggles and difficulties. Many meetings would start with planning visibility events and holiday parties and would end with somber narratives of job loss, familial rejection, and victimization. Certainly, this could be attributed to the nature of a support group meeting – where people often congregate to find commiseration and unity. However, the themes of many workshops, online discussions, and gatherings were additionally built around narratives of oppression and suffering. Individuals also challenged this collective desperation and helplessness in their personal reflections on associating themselves with transgender 'others'. It was, as we shall see, a point of contention for many that had surfaced time and time again in narratives.

Any sort of communal tone often tends to reproduce itself, as new members enter various sites of collectivity and are introduced to the vocabulary, practices and procedures that membership in the group entails. Support group meetings often served as participants' first contact with other people who identified under the general moniker of 'transgender', and they were the places where identity options were explored and vocabularies were learned. This creation of discourse and identity took place not only on the macro level of national organizing but also on the micro level of local support groups and collective meetings. Teri noted in hir reflections on becoming a member of a local support group:

*“As I started realizing things about myself and coming to realize the differences in my perceptions of gender, and I started reaching out to the – what we would know now as the ‘Trans’ community, one of the early groups that I hooked up with was P.E.A.C.E. in Waterbury, and that was – they helped me with the vocabulary and understanding things.”*

Certainly, there is a power in a group’s ability to shape and form the identity of a new member; and such power has significant impacts on both small scale and large scale notions of what it means to be transgender. As we shall discuss later, media – in the form of both internet and television – also serves in the role of “group identity liaison”, shaping individual notions of what trans identity entails long before they attend their first physical support group meeting.

Interacting with other people who identify with trans (whether physically or virtually) inevitably shapes behavior, beliefs, and the social interactions for group members. As Stephen Murray notes in *American Gay*, “Views of what it takes to be a member of the gay, lesbian, or more recently, queer community overlap in varying ways with sexual, political, spiritual, and performance criteria, as they also intersect with other sources of identity or community identification”(1996:129). This attention to intersectionality, and the understanding that no one is “just trans is” profoundly important in understanding how various meanings and challenges to what it means to be “transgender” - and how transgender people should view themselves and one another - are produced and consumed.

Local support groups are significantly different from one another in both their social practice and demographic composition; and it would be erroneous to assume that, from place to place, transgender groups would appear homogenous. It is undeniably convenient for social scientists to assume uniformity and a collective notion of identity when they set off to research various

groups. Valentine notes that “as more recent ethnographic studies have shown...anthropology’s traditional concern with social coherence and functional models of culture hides the ways in which community is rarely as coherent as anthropologists have suggested” (2007:73). His critique resonates with social scientists who work “in the field” with individuals who fall under the constructed label of transgender, where the transgender label appears to be much more complex and lacking in unity than activist and research models have implied.

In Amit and Rapport’s (2002) discussion on studying community in urban centers, they refer to the increasingly ego-focused nucleus of creating community and how individuals seeking a sense of place often find themselves embedded in a “mosaic of little worlds that touch but do not interpenetrate”(2002:42). Feelings of general introduction with lack of meaningful integration into the group as a whole was echoed by several participants with whom I spoke, who seemed to be searching for where they belonged in networks of support groups, social gatherings and conferences. When discussing her participation in community events, Jennifer remarked: “*I wish I could do more with the transgender community. I just haven’t found my niche to get in*”. Claire echoed this sentiment of wanting to be more involved but not finding exactly where she fit in. She noted, during an interview, that drawing support from local transgender groups was difficult because “*it’s a very small community*”. Here, we see a focus on the local groups in discussions of community, rather than a discourse on the larger overarching concepts of what it means to be transgender politically and collectively. The power of local collectives to shape individuals’ identities and understandings of their gender identity was significant. These local groups, however, were products of a larger collective discourse on transgender identity and the belief that is prevalent in Western thought: communities can be structured around monolithic aspects of identity.

While identity-based collectivity may not be rooted in a physical locale or contain a unified population, it still holds a power and influence over how members perceive themselves and how they are perceived by others. They are, by their very existence, abstract – encompassing everybody who finds themselves described by the identity label, and simultaneously existing as symbolic and disembodied entities floating ephemerally on the wings of “identity”. These identities, however, were rooted in social and political struggles and ideological battles for definitions and representation. Steven Gregory wrote extensively on the social and political construction of community and challenged the notion that community was situated in the collective imaginary. Despite their abstract origins, communities and their definitions, he writes, have concrete consequences for their members. ”Communities do exist. People move into them and are excluded from them. Public authorities chart their borders and ‘develop’ them...Politicians represent and appeal to them...Community describes not a static, place-based social collective, but a power-laden field of social relations whose meanings, structures, and frontiers are continually produced, contested, and reworked in relation to a complex range of sociopolitical attachments and antagonisms” (1998:11). Esther Newton also speaks to the concrete reality of community in her discussion of the gay community, Cherry Grove. “Cherry Grove’s existence demonstrates as no abstraction could the old sociological saw that if people believe a thing is real that belief has real consequences” (1993:11). The consequences of creating and shaping a “community”, and setting the perimeters for who is “in” and who is “out”, are certainly real and undeniably entail significant consequences for transgender people. How identity itself is crafted, however, can be found in a tense balance between power and agency. To label a collective identity category as “real” sets a certain precedent that privileges the voices that are the loudest and the most powerful. More important than pinpointing a “community” is

to examine the way that discourse about identities shapes collective imagery, and how individuals form social connections inside of *and* in spite of the dominant discourse of community.

The question of power relations – and the challenge of determining who is able to “speak for” the group - is a topic that comes up time and time again for people who identify as transgender and/or work on issues pertaining to transgender lives (Lapovsky Kennedy 2002, Valentine 2002). Whenever the topic of a collective transgender identity came up in interviews, participants were quick to challenge the idea that they “fit the mold” of what was expected of a group member; and many complained that they found the parameters of group identity too restrictive or too limited to fit their sense of identity. Malia was strongly opposed to the notion of belonging to a collective transgender group, since she felt it was too small of a part of her overall identity. She preferred to associate with members of a local orchestra where she played violin. When discussing her participation in transgender groups, she stated:

*“Sometimes I talk about things with them, but most of the time I just find the people to be somewhat obnoxious anyway. I don’t hang out with people because I’m supposed to. I hang out with them because I like their personality. Sometimes they just really get on my nerves.”*

Not only did Malia not find a great deal of support from other transpeople, she actually found interactions unsettling and upsetting. This antagonistic interaction with dominant characteristics of transgender identity was repeated numerous times by others, during formal interviews and informal conversations throughout the duration of my fieldwork. Paul found the individual

people that he met in local transgender groups to be heavily focused on the negative aspects of trans identity. In his reflections on friendships with other transgender people, he noted:

*“There’s a lot of trans folks...I just...I have to pick and choose and be careful with who I’m close to because a lot of them they want to blame their lives – their lives suckin’ on them being trans. Their life doesn’t suck because they’re trans. Their lives suck because of how they live their lives. My life doesn’t suck because I’m trans. My life sucks because my dad was an asshole.”*

He also felt constrained and upset by the restrictions and regulations that being labeled transgender imposed on his freedoms and self expression. He felt that many individuals were politically inclined and focused on image rather than support.

*“They want us to go trans-pride and all this crap...and I’m like I have better things to do than rub my life in people’s faces, and say... ‘if you don’t like it, you can suck it.’ I don’t – I don’t need to do that crap. I just want to live my life, be left the hell alone, and you know...but some of these transpeople...wanna be all political, and you can’t do this you have to wear your clothes a certain way...and I’m like, ‘What the hell are you talking about?’ I have more things to think about than my jeans and t-shirt.”*

There was a marked trend in all narratives for individuals to set themselves apart as too multidimensional and complex to fully identify with what was viewed as the dominant narrative for trans identity and full inclusion in the transgender collective. Nearly everyone felt they were members, without being fully incorporated into or identified by collective identity. Rachel noted the cyclical nature of transgender support groups; and she felt that once her spouse completed her transition, the group was no longer as relevant to their lives.

*“You know, we’re struggling to find community now, we’re trying to figure out where we fit in. It would be more the queer community than the, um, transgender community, because they’re really goal oriented and it’s kind of a difficult thing, knowing what we know, to always have that cycle of – happening in front of us. It’s not something we’re relating to so well anymore.”*

Many participants also noted the incredibly diverse gender identities and life experiences under the collective umbrella of ‘Transgender’, and were critical of their cohesive relevance or ability to form a unified group. Helen, a transwoman, discusses this complexity and her reluctance to even use the term “transgender community”.

*“Through the community – through the trans community – and I don’t even like using that word, but through people who identify as trans and can relate. I identify easier with a transman than I do a crossdresser.”*

Stazia, also a transwoman, also noted the diversity within the transgender community and her tendency to relate better to some gendered identities than others. Her initial foray into group meetings led her to believe she was not a transwoman but a crossdresser. This was largely due to her preference for group members who identified as ‘crossdressers’ rather than those who identified as transgender. She recalls:

*“I knew they accepted me. It took me awhile to admit that, ‘Yes, I am a crossdresser’, right? But...I wasn’t going to be full time or have the operation like the other girls. I didn’t hate my penis. I don’t even think about it. I don’t know why they spend so much time thinking about it. I think it’s a little weird myself, but that’s another point. And I noticed too, as I got more into the community, um, a lot of the uh...I hate to use the word,*

*but I will anyway, transsexuals...are very depressed people. Very depressed. Oh woe is me, the world is nothing. I lost my family, I lost my job, I lost my friends, but I'm a woman. I'm like...this is not a fun group. So – but the crossdressers, I like them. They're basically...they're basically these rich guys who like to go out and dress up.”*

Star, a transwoman from rural Massachusetts, spent a great deal of our interview outlining what she described to me as the “Hierarchy of Transgenderism”. In a style reminiscent of Gayle Rubin’s (1984) description of “the hierarchal value of sex acts”, she produced a list of transgender identities from the most inferior (where she listed “Closet Kids” [individuals who hide their gender identity] and “Crossdressers” [individuals who dress in their preferred gender occasionally], to the liminal “Pre-Ops” [before Gender Confirming Surgery] and the more esteemed “Post-Ops” [after Gender Confirming Surgery). Everyone critiquing the transgender community seemed to be challenging the narrow definitions of trans identity assumed by the overarching “community” and made attempts to showcase their own personal diversity and lack of acceptance within the collective. The negativity that characterized conceptualizations of trans people and the transgender community was what many respondents found most difficult to accept as an intrinsic part of their own personality and identity. They worked throughout their narratives to set themselves apart from oversimplifications of what it meant to be trans and a “full” member of the transgender whole. They challenged identification based solely on their gender identity and frequently wanted to emphasize that they were not defined by the collective notion of victimization, violence and loneliness.

Internal hierarchies and characterization of fellow transpeople as “other”, based on levels of gender normativity and gender expression of “transgender identity”, kept groups from being fully united. Certain identities, though technically classified as “trans”, were seen as disruptive

to the collective image of the group and were possibly conceptualized as damaging and as the reason that society viewed “transgender” as a negative identity label. What is most interesting about the development of this hierarchy, which situates itself along the lines of normative gender performance, is that it closely mirrors the larger-scale hierarchy that many feel has developed within the LGBT movement - where the “T” is characterized as silent at best and embarrassing at worst. Roberta stated in her reflections on the transgender community that, upon transitioning, she found the trans community was “*the ignored stepchild of the queer community*”. Stazia, who attends a support group in a different state than Roberta, made a nearly identical statement.

*“We’re kind of like on the outside. We’re kind of like the red-headed stepchild. We’re definitely the red-headed stepchild of the LGBT organization, but even in life and stuff. You can see how I’m on the outside with my family basically. And people just don’t understand us, and I wish they did.”*

She noted the multiple levels of marginalization that she experienced as a transwoman, and she continued to explain that she feels a tri-level crunch of marginalization from larger society, LGBT organizations, and family relationships. There is certainly a history of exclusion for transgender people within lesbian and gay cultures and within political movements. Although trans people played a pivotal role in the movements for lesbian and gay liberation, they were, at times, seen as dangerous outsiders who served as a liability to the assimilationist agenda that has often characterized collective calls for lesbian and gay rights (Califia 2007). The very notion of ‘gay’ and ‘lesbian’ identity is built upon a notion of sexual desire for those of the “same gender”, with the assumption that the categories of both male and female are stable and distinct. As Devor and Matte note: “It becomes considerably harder to delineate who is gay and who is lesbian when it’s not clear who is male or man, and who is female or a woman. Like bisexual

people, transgendered and transsexual people destabilize the otherwise easy divisions of men and women into categories of straight and gay because they are both and/or neither. Thus, there is a long standing tension over the political terrain of queer politics between gays and lesbians, on the one hand, and transgendered and transsexual people, on the other” (2006:387). Malia highlighted this sentiment numerous times throughout her interview, as she lamented that the “Rainbow Alliance” at her local college campus was extremely transphobic and was a microcosm of the larger tension between Lesbian and Gay groups and Trans groups. She noted that umbrella LGBT groups, like Rainbow Alliance are *“great for gay people. That’s why I’ve given up on the communities coming together anyway. It’s more productive to split the movements.”*

While some would agree with Malia’s sentiment that the two movements are more suited to take separate courses, others argue that recent developments in queer politics are “encouraging both contemporary feminism and political movements around sexuality to pay greater attention to gender variance” (Hines and Sanger 2010: 9). Certainly, among transgender people I encountered throughout my fieldwork, there were a wide variety of sexual orientations. There were significant numbers of transwomen who identified as ‘lesbians’, transmen who identified as ‘gay’, and those who spent the majority of their adult lives identifying as ‘gay’ or ‘lesbian’ before undergoing a “second coming out” where they began to associate more closely with the identity label of “transgender”. Valentine warns of the reliance on “neat” categories and distinctions between gender identity and sexuality as orderly binaries. In this realm of categorizing sexual desire and grounding it in gender identity, we see the power of various identities to “obscure particular desires both in peoples’ lives and in scholarly discussion of them” (2006:410). If an individual who identified as “Gender Fluid” held erotic desires for

females, how would that form of sexuality be classified? Would labeling their sexuality as “lesbian” erase the identity of the individual who did not embody a male or female gender identity? What does the erasure say about the power to create and label acceptable forms of erotic desire in a given society? One thing that such diversity indicates is the delicate and complex balance between gender and sexuality, and the often interwoven nature of identifying with more than one “letter” in the LGBT movement. This complexity lends credence to urgings of many activists to focus efforts on expanding rights, recognition and justice for *all* gender and sexual minorities.

### **Group Membership and Identity**

Because of the history of struggle that gender and sexual minorities share, there is a strong tendency to conflate common interest groups and identity politics. While political and social action often do unite common-interest groups, they do not serve as the collective foundation for group identity; and the collective negativity that often highlights identity politics actually causes some to reject membership in the transgender collective as a whole. Many times, when I asked people about their involvement in the larger transgender collective, their first response was something along the lines of “I don’t really involve myself in politics”. This close alignment with collective identity and politics is significant and worth examining in depth, as it speaks to some of the reluctance that individuals often feel in identifying themselves as transgender. In their analysis of changing conceptions of identity politics, Linda Martin Alcoff and Satya P. Mohanty (2007) note that at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, movements organized on the basis of identity were seen as positive contributions to the democratic process and as important vehicles for expanding popular political values. Activists in identity based movements believed that change should come from *within* oppressed groups; and identities served as important sources of

knowledge needed for social change. By the dawn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, however, the romanticized notion of identity politics was fading; and minority social movements were considered limited and misguided. There was concern, even from former members of various identity movements, that there was an emphasis on difference at the expense of unity. Many activists calling for equal rights and the end of oppression agreed that a new language of liberation was necessary for social movements of the 21<sup>st</sup> century; and having a common enemy was no longer enough to maintain alliances.

The limited nature of identity based politics speaks to the need for an intersectional analysis of understanding how the multiple *other* identity labels that people take on as members of society shape their trans experience. As Sally Hines notes, “much work on transgender identity has lacked an intersectional analysis with the effect that ‘trans people’ are often represented as only that – as only trans. Hence trans people are disconnected from their intimate, material, geographical and spatial surroundings, and from other significant social signifiers” (2010:12). This tendency to reduce complex lives into single identities strips trans people of their autonomy, diversity and unique histories. It displays a tendency toward skewed power differentials, where those with the power to craft discourse about the transgender community also have the power to erase all competing identities and histories within the collective in an attempt to paint a homogenous and simplified picture of what it means to be trans. Transgender people, understandably, sense this tension between individuality and collectivity; and as we discussed earlier, they attempt to set themselves apart as individuals with multiple interests and additional identities. What, then, unifies these diverse individuals encompassed by transgender identity? As Valentine asks in his ethnography: “How is it that people with different life goals, understandings of their gendered and sexual beings, and different social positions come to be

gathered under ‘transgender’?” (2007:73). It is here that we can highlight the importance of examining what Hines calls the “analysis of lived experience” (2010:12) to enable us to fully understand the diversity of what it means to *be* transgender, and the importance of expanding the ways in which transgender people are portrayed in order to make the identity label applicable to all who may stand to benefit from collective organizing and communal belonging.

For many participants in my fieldwork who identified as trans, the preferred utilization of support groups was to attend meetings to remain in touch with other transgender people, all while understanding that the group was not truly their most significant support system or source of identity. Often, individuals would find the majority of support, assistance, and comfort in smaller groups of people (usually also trans-identified) who they contacted outside of set meetings. Friendships forged inside of support groups would form the basis for coffee dates, phone calls, and weekend visits. These relationships were never considered community-based and were more often classified solely as friendships. There was a keen awareness that many of these friendships were acquired by attending various group meetings, yet these friendships were based on much more than a unilineal identity. Paul reflected on his friendship with other transgender people as separate from association or affiliation with the transgender community. *“I think...I don’t think we’re friends because we’re trans...we’re friends because we’re friends.”* Jennifer and Stazia also had weekly social gatherings with other transgender-identified friends but did not consider these interactions as rooted in transgender collectivity. They solely spoke of their interactions as friendships. Roberta reflected on the importance of having transgender friendships, noting that they provided a certain level of comfort and ease that was not possible in her interactions with other people in her life. *“We do fine with our heterosexual friends and their families, but there’s definitely that – just a little bit of added protection, you know around*

*us.*” This protection, common understanding and friendship was why many people felt most secure and “at home” in their interactions with other transgender people. Removed from the context of interest groups, identity and power, they found that small and intimate friendships served as better sources of support and comfort. This speaks to a desire for equilibrium in power relations and the ability to interact in a way that highlights one’s authentic identity.

For so many participants, kinship relations entailed extremely imbalanced power relations, with family members holding the power to accept or reject them in an arena outside of their control. These same individuals also felt constrained by the collective notion of transgender group identity, where vocabularies, identities and expected behaviors were set by national and local discourses that they did not feel truly represented their realities. Through small and intimate groupings of friends, acquired by and large through organized meetings, there existed the possibility of interaction that was unbridled by power differentials. For many participants, this unbridled and unstructured interaction void of power differentials, signified freedom, acceptance and home. It was in these small-scale, informal collaborations that participants felt a true sense of commonality. A commonality that was both small scale and informal served to challenge dominant and hegemonic power structures, and lacked formal or rigid definitions of community - substituting, instead, terms of collectivity and friendship based on mutual interest and understanding.

### **Identity and Power**

While mutually fulfilling associations - only loosely based on transgender identity – may seem to escape the constraints of power imbalance, we must return to the point of contention that exists even in the most radically inclusive transgender collectives. Who was not able to be part of the

group discourse, and what are the consequences created by their absence? Even if we are to imagine positive transgender identities being created through the collective discourse of small-scale, locality based groups grounded in affinity, we still need to examine which voices are being eliminated from the discourse on micro and macro levels - and why.

Valentine addresses the power relations that are inherent in asking 'who' imagines a group identity and determines membership, and who examines what relationships they bear to "larger structures of inequality and stratification"(2002:103). In speaking of inequality and social stratification, it is important to consider accessibility of sites of community. Conducting fieldwork in relatively remote and rural locations such as Connecticut and Massachusetts, in meeting centers located far from public transportation and nestled miles from the nearest highway, led to a keen awareness that there were not only identity and philosophical barriers for participation in the creation and practice of a transgender collective but also physical and logistical barriers. Group participants were required to have access to a vehicle – either by driving or networking with a driver. Often, people would express regrets over not attending an event due to lack of transportation. Occasionally, I would read posts in various group Facebook pages where individuals requested rides to meetings. (Even use of social media marked an individual as having access to certain resources, since online posting would require computer and internet access). Certainly, this led to group meeting attendance following specific socioeconomic lines; and it undoubtedly excluded some from attending. This exclusion leads us to consider and reflect upon who was not able to participate in discourse due to lack of resources. An examination of group formation must first ask who was left out of the creative process altogether.

While lack of transportation is certainly a significant barrier to attending group events, it is not always the individuals lacking in resources who experience community exclusion. In Kennedy-Davis's exploration of the Buffalo lesbian community in *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold*, she notes that the early bar communities were dominated by working class lesbians who arguably had less to "lose" than those of the professional class if their identities were exposed. Mignon Moore indicated a similar finding in her study of black lesbian families in New York (2011). The same reluctance to attend meetings and to be identified as a member of the transgender collective very likely prevents individuals with high profile careers from having their voices included in the discourse of trans identity and in the place of community in transgender lives. Many older individuals, with whom I spoke at various meetings and workshops, also discussed their reluctance to begin attending meetings or exploring their gender identity when their children were young. These individuals often waited until their children left home for college or became independent teenagers before confronting their feelings about gender and identity and researching support and interest groups. In many narratives, there was a significant "risk assessment" conducted at a personal level, where respondents weighed what was on the table "to lose" if their gender identities were revealed. This indicates a certain economy of participation in transgender life, which I began to label "The Arithmetic of Transition." If there is a significant anticipated loss, individuals will be more likely to suppress or conceal their gender identity and will not attend meetings. Of course, for many respondents, the "cost" of concealing their gender identity becomes so great that they feel they are left with no other options. Claire recalled the moment she knew that she needed to open up about her feminine gender identity. Her life was at stake.

*“I just reached a crisis point, and I had – let’s say I had been pushing this away all my life and that became increasingly difficult, and I found myself sitting on the sofa one night, thinking, “I wonder if I can find a tall bridge to jump off of.”*”

Jennifer had a similar recollection upon realizing that she needed to seek out community and reveal her gender identity.

*“I remember the first reason, um, that I – I sought help, um, and it was – kind of the opposite of what you would think of as far as being depressed, um, and it was – I was driving to work one day, and I realized I was just cruising down the road at 80 miles per hour, and there was just, nothing in my life, and I realized I wanted to live – there was something else there for me. And the fact that I was doing that, and could easily – could easily kill myself in an instant, just took me over the edge. It was really scary.”*

The Arithmetic of Transition entails a series of risk-benefit calculations that create prohibitive costs for identifying as transgender, until a certain “boiling point” is reached. This means that, even if an individual identifies as transgender for decades, he or she will not have full access to group meetings until there is nothing left to lose. This, too, proves to be a significant barrier to group access and certainly limits the full representation of the transgender collective.

The final significant silence in group representation, in various rural Connecticut and Massachusetts locations, was from people of color. In every meeting, conference room and event I attended during my fieldwork, the racial composition of the group was overwhelmingly white. Mignon Moore’s analysis of black lesbian community points to the notion that collective norms vary along racial and ethnic lines and hold different vocabularies, conceptualizations of gender expression, and consequences for non-normative gender expression. These different

cultural conceptualizations of what gender entails leads to lack of common understanding of what it means to be transgender for individuals of color who identify outside of their socially ascribed gender. As Valentine (2007) posits, a completely different set of terms are used to self-identify, keeping individuals from seeking out transgender organizations. Another consideration returns us to the cost-benefit analysis of group access discussed earlier in this section. For African American individuals who identify as transgender, the costs of the “trans” label are extremely high. Being black and transgender puts many individuals in what Kellee Terrell terms a “Double Burden”. Discrimination based on both race and gender creates significant and daunting challenges for those who embody the labels of black and transgender. *Injustice at Every Turn: A Report of the National Transgender Discrimination Survey* was conducted in partnership with the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, The National Center for Transgender Equality, and the National Black Justice Coalition. The findings were presented after surveying 6,500 transgender Americans, 381 of whom identified as black. Findings of the study reported that 26 percent of black transgender people were unemployed. This percentage is three times the rate of the general public and twice the rate of the rest of the trans population. In addition, 41percent of respondents had been homeless at one point in their lives (which is five times the rate for the general US population), and 50 percent had reported at least one suicide attempt at some point in their lives. This rate is higher than any other racial group in the survey (2011). What we can see from this collection of statistics is that it is significantly more costly to identify as transgender for those who also identify as African American. This higher cost could possibly tip the scale and stack the odds against black participation in the discourse that paints a picture of collective transgender identity. It is quite likely that a combination of cultural and social barriers work in tandem to silence black voices in the larger transgender identity discourse.

## Identity and Media

Connections to others are made in a variety of ways. While the majority of this chapter has been focused on face-to-face meetings in physical locations, the virtual world - facilitated by various forms of media - also plays a significant role in both identity formation and collective connections. Although my initial interview questions did not specifically ask about the influence of media in constructing identity or creating ties to transgender 'others', many respondents raised the topic during our conversations. Currently, there is also significant publicity and buzz surrounding the Amazon Studios television series, *Transparent*, which depicts a transwoman who reveals her transgender status to her adult children. It has been praised for both portraying transgender identity in a positive light and for opening up general dialogue about queer families. It is also instrumental in portraying transgender people as "within" families rather than situated "outside" of families. This is a critical distinction we will return to at the conclusion of this chapter. How does media, in both television broadcasting and online formats, serve to structure understandings of self, collective conceptualizations of transgender identity? Are virtual interactions with group members more inclusive than physical real-time interactions? What barriers to access still exist? These questions are necessary to address when exploring the connections between identity and media as they pertain to transgender lives.

Most respondents, in their reflections on developing a trans identity, pointed to both television and the internet as playing important roles in their constructions of selfhood and the ways in which they were perceived by friends and family members. Certainly, increased accessibility to communication technology has fundamentally changed how people interact with one another and connect with the larger world. According to Samuel Wilson, "the Web has created a new arena for group and individual self-representation, changing the power dynamics of representation for

traditionally marginalized groups” (2002:462). For many of the individuals I worked with, the internet proved to be a lifeline – the first place that connections were made with other trans people - and, at times, the first time they felt they were not alone and their gender identities were both understood and valid. Helen discussed the central role that online searches played in her understanding of options for her own transition. *“The internet made it really easy and it was every night. I would be looking every night...for pictures of transition. For before and after. Facial feminization.”* Helen noted that her online searches made her feel that she was part of something larger and that there were options for her when she began living as a female full time. Helen’s online searches began in her basement, where she also kept a hidden collection of women’s clothing. She equated her basement to a “giant closet”, where she found the privacy to explore her gender identity privately via online searches, far from the eyes of her wife and children. Malia also searched for information on gender transition secretly, without the knowledge of her parents. She was significantly younger than Helen when she began searching online. She recalls her online exploration as a pre-adolescent, and she was quite critical of the information available to youth online. *“It was, ONE: stories and TWO: resources warning adult transitioners about the possible challenges they might face. Which, since I was stupid, I didn’t realize that it was for adults – who have a home and spouse to lose.”* She recalled that this information scared her away from identifying as transgender and prevented her from telling her parents or seeking out hormones to prevent the onset of masculine secondary sexual characteristics (a fact that she regrets even as an adult). Two distinct online experiences produced significantly different outcomes for the narrators. This points to the emphasis Mary Gray puts on the fact that “no technology comes prepackaged with a set of ‘good’ or ‘bad’ traits.” Instead, she insists, we must explore “cultural elements of the complexity of human

interactions and our relationships with/to innovation itself” (2009:12). While both positive and negative outcomes may result from online searches and interactions, they often prove a critical first step in many people’s private exploration of their gender identity. Similar responses were found by Beemyn and Rankin in their survey of over 3,000 transgender-identified respondents. They note that in their study, the Internet was a primary method through which members of all age groups (excluding those 53+) became aware that they were not alone in their gender identity (2011:58).

Virtual interaction, as both potentially anonymous and radically inclusive, allowed people to create egalitarian spaces in ways never before thought possible. In virtual interactions, the user has control of which identity to foreground, what information to search for, which personal details to offer, and which online collectives to join. In addition, individuals can create spaces and texts to post online which will serve to structure the larger discourse on transgender identity and perceptions. Teri discussed hir creation of a website to assist hir mother in understanding what it meant to be trans.

*“There are a lot of good books out there, but not many that I want my mom to read because they’re – a lot of books out there are about you know – horrible things that have happened to transsexuals – you know they’re raped and murdered and um, and there’s a lot of things out there with the Maury Povitches out there and the Dr.Phils which talk about the deviance of everything and you know...I didn’t want her [my mother] to get into those salacious things.”*

In this case, Teri’s creation of a website was an attempt to offset the negative and scandalous portrayals of transgender lives that s/he felt were inaccurately portraying hir reality. By

addressing and creating a site that expressed hir own views on identity, s/he was contributing to a larger dialogue about *who* speaks for transgender people. This accessibility to creating discourse and definitions is essential in exploring how groups and identities are created on a virtual plane. Online participation in creating collective imagery has the potential to significantly change the power balance, by allowing for greater access to the discourse that creates collectivity, identity and definitions. Definitions found in online contexts play a central role in shaping notions of what it means to be “transgender” for trans people, their families, and society at large. The definitions people access online can often serve to shape their views on selfhood and reality. Mary Gray notes that online stories and ads convey “generic expectations of what lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) identities look like and beckon young people to authenticate their own claims through a logic of visibility as well as offer “routes to LGBT community recognition and inclusion” (2009:141). This virtual accessibility to defining discourse and group access, however, is concretely grounded in the material realities of offline contexts.

Online interaction allows for a simultaneous engagement with local, national, and international queer communities (Wilson 2002, Gray 2009). These online interactions, however, take place in a broader context of community connections that are grounded both online and offline. As Wilson notes, “identities are negotiated, reproduced, and indexed in a variety of ways in online interactions, and these often cannot be understood without understanding the offline context” (2002:457). Questions of accessibility must once again be raised. Teri’s ability to create a website that posited to ‘define’ what it meant to be transgender was grounded in privilege that allowed hir access to both the technology necessary to craft a website and the technological know-how to execute it. Wilson discusses this relationship between power and access in the digital world, as he notes that “the makeup of online communities rests directly upon the

constitution of Internet users, i.e., those who have access. Access includes a great deal more than the right of entry to the places where Internet-based equipment is kept. It also involves some knowledge of technology itself, as well as a facility and experience level” (Wilson 2002:460). This opens up a new realm of both inclusion and exclusion in the context of new media and virtual interest groups.

While there is still a differential level of access to transgender groups and resources, as we move online, there is a significant change to the arithmetic of group access that I discussed earlier. One significant constraint that is eliminated by the internet is the element of disclosure. The internet and online groups have allowed for unprecedented access to private explorations of self and gender. Nearly all respondents, and many other trans people that I engaged in conversation, mentioned the freedom that online searches and communities gave them in terms of exploring what it meant to be ‘transgender’, without having to publicly reveal this information to friends, family, coworkers or neighbors. Paul, a transman, used internet chat rooms to make friendships with transgender people, even before he openly revealed his male gender identity. He met his future wife online while presenting as a woman in his day to day life. The “cost” of participating in an anonymous online transgender group is dramatically lower than the “cost” of participating in a local support group. Many of the benefits of connecting with other transgender people could be gleaned with little or none of the risk. This opens the door to more participation and more connections. Mary Gray argues that the online/offline dichotomy no longer applies in today’s world, where individuals move seamlessly between digital and physical interactions. She notes that many queer youth no longer make a distinction between “public” life offline, and “private” life online. According to Gray, most online interactions can be conceptualized as an expansion of public expression and public space. This is especially evident in use of Facebook

connections, where individuals build an online profile and personality that is often an extension of their daily lives. I was able to see this type of public engagement in a digital format through various local Facebook groups where members used their full names and often had profile pictures of their faces. In these contexts, information on local meetings were posted, rides to various venues were coordinated, and articles were discussed. Indeed these were, for many, considered “public spaces”. However, even the widely accessed world of Facebook provides the crucial option for alternative identities and anonymity, which doubtlessly allowed individuals to participate in ways that they would not be able to via other channels.

While online interactions were the focal point of ‘private’ or ‘individualized’ explorations of identity, television programs were consistently highlighted as the ‘public’ and ‘collective’ ways in which transgender people felt they were perceived and understood by friends and family. Specifically, talk shows were highlighted as tools through which popular views on transgender identity, and the community at large, were conceptualized. Roberta recalled that her family’s acceptance of her transgender identity noticeably changed when a transwoman was featured on the Oprah show.

*“When I went through transition that’s when Jenny Boylan was on Oprah. So at that time we went from the Geraldo show to Oprah. And as corny as that was, more people in my extended family saw that show and reacted to it better than any other thing that Rachel and I had presented or spoken on or anything. They were like, ‘Oh we saw her’ and she’s a pretty traditionalized transgender story, and yet it spoke to my extended family.”*

Stazia also recalled that her mother was more accepting of her transgender identity because of the shows she had watched previously on television. She recalls her mother saying: *“You see shows with transgender people a couple times a week now. If not them, lesbians and gays.”* For Stazia’s elderly mother, the television presence of LGBT people played an important role in the understanding of her own child’s gender. Participants also ranked the representation of transgender lives in the media, in terms of what kind of collective imagery it portrayed. For example, Jerry Springer was continually brought up as an embarrassing, circus-like portrayal of transgender identity. When she was trying to explain the chaos that she sometimes found in her personal relationships, Maria quipped: *“My life occasionally does turn into an episode of Jerry Springer, but I work through it, and that’s just life.”* Rachel discussed the difference in representation determined by the caliber and tone of the show itself. *“That thing from Geraldo and Springer to Oprah...it just seems like it’s more – something worthy of sympathy than like, ‘Wow that’s crazy!’.”* This transformation of public opinion – from the “craziness” of the Jerry Springer and Geraldo shows, to the sympathy elicited from a spot on Oprah, points to the power of television and media in crafting public understanding and opinions of transgender lives.

Television was also depicted as playing an important role in individual participants’ understanding of their own gender identities. The ways in which trans people were presented in the media had a significant impact on some individuals’ sense of self and what it meant to identify as part of a larger transgender collective. For Star, seeing Phil Donahue dress in a skirt and discuss transgender issues was the very first time she understood the feelings that she had been having since childhood. She noted that when she saw, for the first time ever, another man dressing in feminine clothing, she knew she was not alone. No one in her life had ever brought up the term transgender, and even at the time it was what she described as “taboo”. Helen also

recalled watching Donahue, a popular talk show at the time, and how much it shaped her early understandings of self.

*“I remember as a child watching Donahue. And as I was watching Donahue they were interviewing a drag performer, but the drag performer was probably on hormones, because what I latched onto was her appearance and physically seeing her with breasts – the reality of that, like seeing someone at a level who was identified as a male being physically more female, and it was the same feeling I get now about who I am.”*

Paul also had his revelation about gender identity through a television program. He recalled watching a Discovery Channel documentary on Dr. Marci Bowers and her transition from male to female. He recalled:

*“I started seeing these things about Marci Bowers...they did shows about her on the Discovery Channel. And I knew there were male to females, but when I started seeing the shows about females to males, I thought... ‘Damn! That’s what it is!’ It just hit me! It was like, ‘That’s what the hell it is!’”*

The power of television portrayals of transpeople must be acknowledged in their ability not only to shape collective public opinions on what it means to be transgender, but also on how they shape individual notions of identity and how one should conceptualize transgender selfhood.

### **Conclusion: Transgender Connections vs. Kinship Connections?**

Examining the relationship between kinship connections and connections with other transgender people, it becomes apparent that they are two very different ways to conceptualize relatedness, identity and relationships that one can draw upon. Participants see kinship and transgender

collectives as competing spheres of existence, each with their own distinct power relationships and differentials. Not only are support groups or organizations not a substitute for kinship, the collective image of “transgender” is often viewed as kinship’s binary opposition. For many participants, group meetings are seen as engagements where one pursues private and individual identity in the absence of family members. Initial forays into support group meetings are often secretive practices. Meetings themselves are often filled with discussions of rejection and isolation from kin groups, or they hold a decidedly trans-only composition. Participants who had young children did not feel that there were enough opportunities for family-friendly events within the transgender community. When events were planned, they often took place with the assumption that participants would attend alone. Transgender alliances were seen as markedly distinct from individual kinship networks – a collective abstraction that needed to be justified and explained to kin. There were no significant attempts to consolidate the two as “personal connections”. Transgender people felt a significant burden conducting “image control” and shielding family members from the negative portrayals of collective transgender identity. Most damaging, in the eyes of most participants, was the tendency for transgender people as a whole to be portrayed as either scandalous or pathetic. The majority of people with whom I spoke wanted to set themselves apart from what Valentine described as “representational violence” and portray their individual identities as multifaceted, with gender identity playing only a small role. Media was seen as able to either facilitate this process or to create distorted images that would have to be challenged through counterexamples.

The collective view of the transgender identity for most transpeople I spoke with was both abstract and essentializing. Relationships with fellow transgender people, created inside the context of support group meetings and workshops were often viewed as formal, purpose-driven

and limited to monthly contacts. Often, participants found these relationships comforting, in the sense that they felt there were other people with similar struggles and challenges; yet, they found them simultaneously frustrating, since these relationships were based on a narrow category of their overarching sense of self. Group composition tended to change significantly from month to month and/or year to year, which led to a lack of continuity and shared history. This feeling of shared history is viewed as essential in kinship and friendship connections.

This is not to say that meetings and collectives organized around transgender identity provided no positive support to participants. In fact, many individuals found a great deal of enjoyment and fulfillment from the intimacy of formal community meetings. These smaller groups of friends would meet often for coffee or would call to check in with one another via telephone. What is interesting about these smaller groups, described earlier in the chapter is that most participants did not classify them as “transgender” connections. They visualized these relationships as solely grounded in the realm of friendship, and repeatedly highlighted the fact that the affinity was based on a variety of common interests (the least of which was a common transgender identity). These interactions were engaged voluntarily and informally; and gatherings were freed from traditional expectations of group meetings or discussions of gender identity. The egalitarian nature of the groups was, perhaps, most striking and essential in understanding why large-scale group meetings were not fulfilling a sense of connection and belonging for transgender participants. In both kinship ties and group-based ties, transpeople found themselves bound in webs of power differentials. In kinship relations, they found themselves disempowered and at the mercy of family members, with the power to either accept or reject them as fellow kin. In formal group relations, they found themselves essentialized and defined solely by their gender identities. Rules of conduct, behavior and belief were set by

discourses that they viewed as beyond their control and even misrepresentative of their personal sense of self. The only refuge from these skewed power differentials was found in small, intimate groupings, which often originated in larger transgender meeting sites but took on a dynamic all their own. These groupings were defined by their voluntary entrance, lack of formal titles, and lack of marked power differentials. They appeared, on first glance, to be solely built upon friendship. However, these groupings carry a deeper connection for members, who view their fellow members as possessing an empathy and understanding that only fellow transgender people can possess. These groupings are reminiscent of Giddens' pure relationship and result in relationships defined not by power, but by mutuality of being. This equilibrium is especially valuable to transpeople who feel the double bind of kinship and group power imbalances on a daily basis. Amit (2002) argues that anthropology is especially well suited to provide the careful and detailed understanding of relationships and their contexts, necessary when examining the question of belonging. Rather than reifying collective notions of identity-based labels, she urges us to turn our attention to how individuals achieve social connections that serve their needs; and, simultaneously, she urges us to focus on how social connections can be rearranged to exercise agency and challenge collective notions of essentialized identities, instead building intimate, sustainable and empowering connections.

## **CHAPTER 4: THE FAMILY IN CONTEXT: RELATIONSHIPS, LAW, and HUMAN RIGHTS**

If we analyze kinship and how individuals reckon relatedness, we must also examine the relationship between individuals, families, and the law. We can often view the values, moral codes, and conceptualizations of justice in a given society by looking at its laws. The law, in many societies, categorizes and defines how individuals structure and conceptualize relatedness and connections. As Schneider highlighted in his analysis of American kinship, bonds with others are forged through both “substance” and “code”. Often, that code is reinforced and verified through legal process. As Strathern argues, “relationality – as an abstract value placed on relationships – is highlighted in a recognizable and conventional manner through attention to the law” (2005:viii). Relationships recognized by the law are seen as more permanent and stable than relationships that are founded solely through voluntary affiliation and practice.

Relationships, viewed in the context of law, also have recognized and protected rights that informal relationships lack. Although the liberal state likes to make a marked distinction between “public” and “private” lives of its citizens, the policing of sexuality and gender betrays underlying discrepancies between protecting the privacy of its citizens, and painting a picture of which forms of gender and sexuality are permissible and valued in the larger nation state (Seidman 2005:225). In the United States, the legal system outlines and defines the normative values of family, sexuality, marriage, and gender expression. As Hodgson explains, “international and state laws at once reflect and produce prevailing gendered moral codes, including ‘approved’ bodily practices, ‘proper’ sexual relationships, and normative family formations” (Hodgson 2011:4). The recognition of relationships as “acceptable” in formal

legislation provides a level of security and protection of rights that is unattainable for those who fall outside the privilege of recognition.

Gaps in recognition can lead to power vacuums in rights claims, with individuals who experience multiple levels of marginalization less likely to make rights claims and more likely to live in fear of legal penalties for their sexual or gender identity. In the United States, transgender people are often viewed as outside of the scope of family law, or so disruptive to the moral integrity of family life that they are unfit to raise children or maintain custody in a divorce battle. Lambda Legal – a leading advocacy group for LGBT rights in the United States - states for both current and hopeful transgender parents: “Judges and adoption agencies sometimes try to stop transgender adults from bringing children into their lives or even to remove them from their homes. Misperceptions and prejudices about transgender people fuel many custody disputes. High emotions are often in play when a non-transgender co-parent is unable to accept a transgender parent’s transition and files for divorce. Sometimes an ex-partner questions a transgender parent’s suitability in court in order to try to change a custody arrangement.” (Lambda Legal, November 2014) Because of the variability from state to state, and even from judge to judge, a transgender parent’s ability to adopt or even maintain custody of existing children is not secured throughout the country. Lambda Legal discusses the case of *Cisek v. Cisek*, where the court effectively terminated the transgender parent’s visitation rights due to potential mental and social harm to the children. While other cases have upheld the rights of a transgender parent, it is always the miscarriage of justice that looms largest in the minds of marginalized populations. The cases where rights were stripped, severed, or denied in the realm of marriage, inheritance, and custody are recounted as cautionary tales within transgender circles. They craft and construct a collective tendency, especially in the context of family law

and divorce cases, for individuals to avoid pushing for additional visitation rights with children, or additional acquisitions from joint assets. As Jennifer Levi writes in the introduction to *Transgender Family Law*, "...many transgender clients who have taken the risk of going to court have found themselves in front of tribunals influenced by the widespread community and social bias against transgender people generally" (2012:8). The legacy of legal discrimination, and the perceived threat of serious breaches of justice, can be nearly as prohibitive to transgender rights as actual offenses in legislation and the court. Uncertainty that one will receive a favorable decision, and fear that the scant rights already claimed will be further reduced, creates a fear and skepticism of how much protection the law can offer - silencing voices even further. Due to the historical discrimination or invisibility of transgender people in the legal system, there is a tendency to see rights as something that must be "petitioned for" rather than "claimed" (Osiatynski 2009).

This central difference hinges on a foundation of dignity, which has been considerably absent in transgender lives, regardless of which sphere of interaction we are analyzing. From private familial relationships, to medical discourse and legislation, trans lives are very often portrayed as unidimensional and void of both dignity and humanity. The stark reality is addressed by Paisley Currah: "For the most part, transgender people have not been excluded from civil rights protections because of conceptual or philosophical failures in legal reasoning, but rather because they have not been viewed as worthy of protection, or, in some cases, even as human" (2005:36). The humanization of transgender lives, and the contextualization of transgender people as productive members of families and communities, is central in the recognition and exercise of both rights and dignity. If we are to employ a human rights lens, the robust understanding of multiple aspect of transgender lives, and the lives of those they love and are loved by, must be

central to the discourse. Richard Wilson (1997) discusses how anthropology, as a discipline, is well suited to contextualizing particular accounts of abuse and violations, with attention to biographical and historical details. These contextualizations of rights and rights claims are based on the foundational premise that “contextualization is a familiar and powerful intellectual resource” (Strathern 2005:131). Contextualizations, and multidimensional depictions of trans people as not only individuals and victims but as family members, professionals and citizens, are central and crucial to the maintenance of dignity. They are also crucial to the power to claim rights in multiple spheres affecting daily life – from civil and political, to economic and social. In this chapter, we first examine the conceptualization of rights in the daily lives of transgender people, followed by the discursive and ideological effects of law and the consequences of invisibility and marginality within a legal framework. Finally, the benefits and limits of the application of transgender rights within a human rights framework will be examined.

### **(Family) Law and Order**

When I spoke with people about their experience with legal discrimination following gender transition, there was surprisingly little commentary or interest in discussing the implications of legislation or family law. Many of the conferences I attended did have workshops addressing transgender rights, but many of them were significantly geared toward insurance and workplace laws, and didn't focus on the legal status of families, custody, or marriage. Lambda Legal held a workshop entitled “Transgender Rights”, and passed out a series of fliers, one of which covered “Transgender Parents”. However, the questions posed to presenters at workshops focused largely on medical and workplace discrimination. The tendency of discourse to focus on transgender people as individuals with medical and economic concerns, rather than familial concerns, was evident even in the political and legal realm. So often, transgender people are

assumed to exist in *contrast* to family life rather than situated *within* family life. This portrayal was evident even in conferences and workshops focusing on transgender issues. This is significant, because recognition of an individual as a member of a family group plays an important role in humanizing that person as well as his or her experiences. In *Out in the Country*, Mary Gray discusses the portrayal of LGBT youth in the rural South as rooted in “family” vocabulary. This discourse is focused on bringing youth, who would otherwise be viewed as “deviant” into the fold of community by labeling them as “family” and “our own”. Gray emphasizes the importance of being seen as a family member in order to be an understandable “other” rather than an unfathomable other, as she writes: “Family can transform queer strangers into local girls and boys, providing much needed ‘familiar’ status” (2009:169). She notes that “familiarity” is the primary language through which people understand one another in rural areas to be seen primarily as family members, regardless of gender identity, sexual orientation, or other identity labels. Gray asserts that “family is the primary category through which rural community members assert their right to be respected” (2009:37). This could be expanded beyond the narrow binary opposition of “rural” and “urban” and be seen as the primary way in which all individuals wish to be seen. The power of kinship symbolism, and the instant connections one can make with terms like “mother”, “father”, “daughter”, and “son”, are not only cognitively satisfying but also carry significant moral and humanizing weight. Family is a powerful lens through which we structure our primary relationships, and where we find connections over our lifetime. Community connections are very often viewed as secondary to kinship connections. The emotional power and weight of kinship, and the privilege of being viewed within the context of family, cannot be minimized. To be seen as a family member, and to have one’s family recognized by the legal system, are both integral to the empowerment and

dignity of the individual. Family is the humanizing site. Family is a *lingua franca* – a common language through which we can positively contextualize one another as knowable. Philosopher Emmanuel Levinas discusses the central importance of seeing the “face” of the “other” - knowing it and understanding it– as central to compassion and humanity: “...the face presents itself and demands justice” (1991:294) That “face” is often more easily viewed when it is nestled in the familiar discourse of kin membership – where most individuals situate their primary identity. By obscuring transgender rights in the formal legal system, and in informal daily practice, transpeople are often depicted as ‘outside the fold of family’, left in a liminal social and legal limbo, where they lack both rights and humanity, and where ‘faces’ become distinctly unrecognizable.

Overwhelmingly, in discussions I had with individuals about their identity as family members, people took issue with the fact that membership in transgender interest groups was not compatible with their family relationships. Individuals who had young children noted that support group meetings were not suitable places to bring them, and that attending trans events often made them feel as if they were being selfish and taking time away from their family members. Several respondents, in casual conversations, expressed the need for more family-oriented gatherings and activities in an attempt to combine their family and gender identities. One partner of a transwoman even suggested we work together to create a Queer Family Meet-Up event, since nothing like it had occurred in the area before. What was evident in all of these suggestions was the clear distinction people made between their identities as family members and their identities as transpeople. The consolidation of “trans” and “family” identities was a source of conflict for many people. One was either foregrounding their “trans” identity *or* their ‘family’ identity. Picnics, amusement park outings and day trips, which are often integral parts

of other identity-based groups, were virtually nonexistent for local transpeople. The power of discourse that paints ‘transgender’ as incompatible with “family” seems to have spilled over into the reality of support group meetings and transgender gatherings. Discourse has the power to shape interaction and frame experience in both the private and public spheres. This is perhaps best illustrated by examining the legal discourse surrounding LGBT families, and how it structures and constrains transgender lives and opportunities.

Beyond a yearning to consolidate “transgender” and “family” identities, there are gaps in legal recognition of transgender family rights that are shaped, if and when an individual decided to reveal their transgender identity and transition to the gender they most strongly identified with. In interviews, conversations about the time when individuals decided to reveal their gender identity revealed their careful and thoughtful calculations. It was what I described earlier as an “arithmetic” of transition they employed - a meticulous and calculated determination of when to reveal one’s true gender identity. It is a multifaceted and complex web for many – consisting of factors such as dependent children’s age, financial situation, and anticipated reaction of a spouse. Many individuals with whom I was able to speak at length did not reveal their gender identity or make attempts to live in their chosen gender until their children were independent. Those who found it impossible to wait until their children reached maturity had emotionally prepared themselves to receive fewer visitation and custody rights in the event of a divorce. Hines found a similar tendency among her participants, who all indicated “professional and relationship commitments are articulated as coping mechanisms for complex feelings around gender identity and as an explanation for late transition” (2007:129). She notes that many transitions described to her “were reflexively negotiated and performed within the context of work and family life”. With legal recognition - whether it is in marital or parental relationships - comes the power to

make rights claims, from both the state and from others. For individuals who are cisgender (non-transgender), those rights are clearly outlined based on a concrete and arguably static identity. Individuals undergoing gender transition, on the other hand, surrender that static identity and find themselves in a perilous state of liminality. Strathern argues that “people who find things out about their ancestry, and thus about their relations with others, acquire identity by that very discovery. The information constitutes what they know about themselves” (2005:69). The discovery of one’s gender identity, however, does not secure that same sense of “knowing”. When gender identity changes, the individual is thrown into both social and legal limbo. This liminal state of uncertainty constitutes a space where both knowledge and rights are surrendered. It is in this liminal state that legal protection is needed the most, yet it is also where the silence of the law and legal discourse on transgender rights is glaringly (and dangerously) obvious.

### **Discursive and Ideological Effects of the Law**

As we discussed previously in this chapter, legal discourse and recognition plays an important role in defining rights and providing empowerment. Strathern argues that the law, which can be divided into the separate camps of ‘utility’ and ‘expression’, both play a central role in shaping our conceptualizations about a group of people and their rights. She points out that “the law’s expressive genre makes objects such as ‘communities’ by producing significations about them; at the same time, in instrumental genre, it creates documents and verdicts that do not represent but instantiate (say) a community’s rights” (2005:85). The final statement is crucial in emphasizing the central import of legal recognition for transgender people. If, as Strathern states, the law serves to define a community’s rights, the absence of legal recognition is, in essence, the absence of rights. There has been extensive discussion on the limitations of ‘legal justice’ in acquiring civil and social rights for marginalized populations. Mary Bernstein cautions against the view

that legislative success is indicative of a social movement's success. She states that "formulating claims in terms of rights is problematic because such claims can, in turn, generate competing rights claims" (2005:5). Under this view, "legal change generally fails to alter existing power relations". The attention Bernstein places on power differentials between queer communities and larger institutional structures is crucial to a robust analysis of law, recognition, and rights. Most anthropologists would agree with her view that, when it comes to social movements, "theorists must understand not only a movement's political impact, but its mobilization and cultural effects, including the development or deployment of identities, discourse, and community-building". It is also significant to note, however, that legal recognition and explicit laws protecting rights are central to remediating skewed power differentials and allowing for the creation of secure, positive identities and empowered communities.

One of the most disempowering dimensions of daily existence, for transgender people in the groups I worked with, was the uncertainty of basic rights and recognitions in both social and legal interactions. This is not, of course, to imagine law as a benevolent abstraction in which rights are protected and guaranteed. As Wilson notes, "legal categories are not just benign cognitive products of 'social imagination', but are there for institutions which are dedicated to the practice of violence, coercion and surveillance" (1997:16). Merry also asserts that "law is more than a form of thought or a system of signs, as in the formulations of cultural relativism, hermeneutics and postmodernism – it is also a form of violence endowed with the legitimacy of formally constituted authority" (1992:360). This surveillance and violence, of course, can take place through the creation of legally sanctioned discriminations. However, it can be equally as damaging in its silence and failure to explicitly protect and promote rights for marginalized groups.

There is marked tension in the question of how one should go about recognizing diverse family forms and ensuring that all connections are prioritized and valued, regardless of whether they fit the framework of formally recognized kin ties or not. Many queer theorists strive for the abandonment of notions that prioritize and privilege the nuclear family and its subsequent kinship connections as more durable and orderly than relationships forged outside of kinship (Borneman 2001, Freeman 2007, Gittins 2007, Rapp 1987). They often call for radical social change rather than rights-oriented reform, which is viewed as too limiting and narrow to fit all conceptualizations of family. However, this approach has its pitfalls and drawbacks. In calling for a complete reconceptualization of family, kinship and legal rights, there is a risk of portraying certain individuals (namely those who are queer-identified, part of a sexual minority, or gender nonconforming) as situated “outside” of kinship’s door. There is a marked symbolic power in idioms of the family that mark individuals as “belonging” somewhere. This is true at both the intimate and personal level, as well as within the more impersonal national context. By marking transgender people as “outside” or “beyond” kinship, we simultaneously mark them as “outside” and “beyond” understanding as neighbors and citizens. Recent Marriage Equality movements illustrate the tension between state regulations and the official recognition of diverse family forms. In the United States, it is difficult to dismiss the many benefits that come with legally recognized civil marriage. Protections in the areas of insurance and pension plans with spousal benefits, protection of housing rights, divorce rights, domestic violence protection, and social security or veterans’ benefits have previously been reserved for heterosexually married couples. Legal recognition of same sex marriage extends these rights to all citizens regardless of the couple’s sexual orientation (Sherman 1992, Lanutti 2005). In fact, many couples who would not normally be interested in legally formalizing their relationship have stated that if they could

attain the benefits of marriage for themselves and their partners, they would likely file for recognition (Sherman 1992). This tradeoff between recognition and surveillance, between rights and control, undoubtedly surfaces as we discuss legal recognition. Even those skeptical of the efficacy of the law understand its power in creating conception of community, power, and citizenship. Borneman focused on legal recognition of diverse family forms and prefaced his essay by writing that he focused on legal recognition “not because it is the only type of social recognition, but because the state and its law remain the most powerful institutional force in our contemporary world conferring rights and privileges. Very few people can afford to live outside this law” (Borneman 2011:35).

Indeed, legislation crafts understanding of the “good citizen” and “bad citizen” through the drafting and enforcement of various laws, along with the validation (or non-validation) of specific unions and family forms. As Strathern indicates, “the law sets up protocols and boundaries that direct people’s actions, and deploys categorical or conceptual relations” (2005:85). Bernstein reminds us that in 1960, every single US state had a sodomy law banning certain nonprocreative sex acts, including sodomy and oral-genital contact. While these laws were originally applicable to both opposite-sex and same-sex couples, they tended to be used to control and penalize lesbians and gay men. According to Bernstein, “sodomy laws have also signified support for a heteronormative order that posits distinct gender and sexual roles for men and women” (2005:3). This legal regulation and surveillance of both sexual practice and gender conformity is an example of the destructive potential of legal surveillance and regulation, and the construction of “good” and “bad” sexual citizens. As Seidman states, “sex laws and policies are guided by a form of the good sexual citizen. By criminalizing and disenfranchising certain sexual acts, identities, or intimate arrangements, the state helps to create a sexual hierarchy.

Some acts or identities are tolerated, but barely, others are not tolerated at all, and still other expressions are deemed so intolerable that those who engage in them are scandalized as ‘bad sexual citizens’ – immoral and dangerous to society. Bad sexual citizens become the targets of social control, which may include public stereotyping, harassment, violence, criminalization, and disenfranchisement” (2005:225). Lack of full citizenship rights can impact both major life decisions and small daily practices. As Patrick Califia states, “transgendered peoples’ ability to legally marry, retain custody of children, and even simply use restrooms in the workplace and in venues like shops, parks, movie theaters, or stadiums, is fraught with difficulty until we become full citizens in the eyes of the law with the same rights to privacy, freedom of expression, and other civil liberties that non-transgendered people can usually take for granted” (2003:xv).

Whether or not one’s private and public existence is officially recognized and affirmed can have a major impact on how one sees his or her place as a member of society, and whether or not he or she feels empowered to claim basic rights. Seidman asserts that citizenship entails the integration of an individual into a system of rights, duties, and state protections. However, it also implies that only individuals who possess the personal traits and behaviors a nation values - the “good citizens” - can fully enjoy these rights (2005: 236). Only “good citizens”, of course, can expect to have their families recognized and protected by the law. This view of the citizen, nation, and law hearkens to Carsten’s assertion that we must closely examine “the direct linkages between the enclosed, private world of the family, and the outside world of the state’s legislative apparatus and the project of nation-making” (2004:6).

The power of legislation to validate family forms can be found in a conversation that occurred during my research. I was having coffee with the spouse of a transwoman. Their relationship had begun in a traditional heterosexual marriage, where she labeled herself as “wife” and her

spouse (who at the time of their marriage vows presented as male) was labeled as “husband”. Their marriage took place twenty years ago and was formally recognized by the state. As her husband began to undergo gender transition and took on a female gender presentation, she felt at a loss as to how to define their relationship. Same-sex marriage was legally recognized in Connecticut at the time of their marriage. However, she did not feel that her spouse had become her wife. *“I don’t share the history of struggle with lesbians, and describing my spouse as my ‘wife’ would imply that,”* she stated. She was also uncomfortable when people asked how long she had been married, since her mentioning of 20 years hearkened back to the days when same sex marriage was not recognized in the United States, and therefore pointed to the complexity of the relationship. However, she finished our conversation by noting that she was thrilled that the marriage equality movement was gaining momentum across the country, because it “validated” her family in ways that she never imagined. Even with advances in same sex marriage, transgender families find themselves in a vague hinterland, where they are validated only through institutions that do not share their unique identity, history, or struggle. They are neither “good citizens” nor “bad citizens”, but “invisible citizens”, with uncertain and untested outcomes in the formal legal system.

Explicit legal protections for gender minorities in the United States are limited to workplace protection under ENDA (Employment Non-Discrimination Act), and otherwise virtually nonexistent, leaving in their place a power vacuum that continually serves to allow local, individualized interpretations of the law that continually serve to limit or erase transgender rights. This is especially evident in decisions made in family court. Discourse on transgender people is so often focused on their existence “outside” of the family that it significantly limits their rights within a familial framework. This is evident in the examination of various court

cases where the law failed to protect trans people and ensure their rights as family members. As Currah and Minter noted in their article on transgender legal rights, “transgender people face severe discrimination in virtually every aspect of social life – in employment, housing, public accommodations, credit, marriage, parenting, and law enforcement among others. This discrimination is rooted in the same stereotypes that have fueled unequal treatment of women, lesbian, gay, and bisexual people, and individuals with disabilities – that is, stereotypes about how men and women are “supposed” to behave, and how male and female bodies are ‘supposed’ to appear” (2005:35). Individuals remaining outside the expectations from a good citizen often find their most basic rights in jeopardy. This is certainly true in various decisions made in the context of transgender family law, as we shall see in the next section.

### **Claiming Rights**

Fear, discrimination, and uncertainty were common themes in the narratives of transgender people I spoke with, as well as narratives collected by other researchers (Califia 2003, Hines 2007, Levin 2012,). When asked about discrimination surrounding gender transition, individuals were quick to list the outcomes they feared upon revealing their gender status. Some of the most common fears were that their children would be taken away from them, their spouses would file for divorce and receive full custody of their children, and/or their marriage would no longer be recognized by state law if both partners held the same gender marker on their identity forms.

Terri had vivid recollections of the fears that existed coming out to hir spouse in the early 1990’s. Hir anxieties, and the anxieties of hir wife, were described within the context of law and legal protections. Terri stated that, “*The laws were a bit different then. And people’s perceptions were a bit different then. And anecdotally you heard all these horror stories about*

*kids being taken away, people losing their jobs. She had concerns like, if it became known, would the state come and take our kids?"* This widespread fear that the basic right to family and the right to maintain parental rights could be denied to someone, based on their gender identity, led to many individuals calculating the 'risk' of revealing their true gender identity as too steep. This fear very likely led to many individuals suppressing the expression of their gender if they had small children in the household. Anecdotal stories and sensational news reports could not be countered with solid protective laws; and they continue to provide little uniformity or guarantee of parental rights for transgender parents, or the right to protection for transgender children. In his book *Sex Changes*, Patrick Califia details the case of six-year-old Aurora Lipscomb, who was genetically male but self-identified as a female. Because her parents allowed her to present as a female, the Franklin County Children's Services ruled that she be removed from the home and placed in protective custody. In December 2000, it was decided that Aurora would remain in foster care with only limited visitation rights with her parents. This case, and cases like it, have a profound impact on the likelihood that transgender people will petition the courts or other legal authorities to make rights claims. The uncertain outcomes that arise from various transgender family court decisions lead to a tremendous amount of fear and trepidation.

The right to found a family - a right protected under international human rights law - is also not concretely protected for transgender people. While no state officially prohibits adoption by transgender parents (Levi 2012), there are more subtle discriminations built into the system that prevents transpeople from becoming adoptive parents. Roberta recalled her own experience trying to adopt in her home state:

*"In 2005, we decided – 'Let's try to have kids'. We were trying and trying and that wasn't working. We went through the adoption route, and DCF was like...We went all*

*the way through and they were like, ‘Yeah – so if we had a queer kid we could give them to you.’ They didn’t know how to deal with it because they were like – they also were legally bound to not say they couldn’t place anyone, but they made it clear they wouldn’t place anyone. Unless it was a total distress case that matched.”*

While I have outlined two cases of familial discrimination in this section, both a national case and an individual reflection, there are countless others who have experienced similar threats to their family rights. In the above instances, the gray area of legal liminality proved to be prohibitive of basic rights for transgender families. Lawyer Jennifer Levi warns that this silence of the law is particularly dangerous, because “many transgender clients who have taken the risk of going to court have found themselves in front of tribunals influenced by the widespread community and social bias against transgender people generally” (2012:65). Strathern’s assertion that “the law deals with persons in relation to categories” (2005:xviii) comes as a poignant reminder that, in the context of transgender rights, the category of “family” is rarely seen as compatible with “transgender”. This tendency to classify transgender people as “outside the fold of family” has very real consequences for individuals and families in the United States. Being depicted within the context of a family makes one familiar and knowable in the small-scale context of community and the large-scale context of state, federal, and international law. As we discussed earlier, being recognized as a family member has a tremendous and undeniable humanizing effect. Being recognized as “outside” of family, however, can have the opposite effect. Denying an individual the right to family is the denial of basic human rights. In the following section, we will examine the role human rights law and rhetoric plays in transgender rights claims within the United States.

## **Human Rights, Transgender Rights**

While international activists for LGBT rights have found success in tapping into human rights frameworks to demand rights to family and privacy, the US Marriage Equality movement and movements for transgender rights and protections has been historically void of human rights strategies. While much of the rhetoric structuring the demands for equality and legal recognition has used human rights vocabulary, the focus of advocacy groups has largely focused on reforming state and national legislation. Julie Mertus writes that, “on the whole, very few LGBT groups in the US rely on identity-based human rights framings as their preferred strategy for promoting social change” (2007:1038). Mertus attributes this, in part, to the reluctance of LGBT groups in the United States to conform to the acceptance of essentialist categories necessary for identity-based claims to human rights. Critics claim that categories as they exist today don’t incorporate the fluidity and diversity of gender and sexuality in the LGBT community. Another possible explanation offered, for the lack of human rights strategies in most domestic movements, is that the traditional civil rights model has proven most successful for other identity based groups lobbying for equal rights in the past. The protections available under international human rights law are significant; and there is international criticism that the United States fails to fully recognize certain fundamental human rights for its citizens – especially those who fall under the umbrella of gender and sexual minorities. As Holning Lau mentions, “The UN Human Rights Committee has criticized the United States’ sexual orientation laws as infringing on human rights protected by the ICCPR [International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights]. The United States’ national laws regarding sexual orientation seem to be diverging from international trends” (2004:1704). In 2006, the *Yogyakarta Principles on the Application of International Human Rights Law in Relation to Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity* was

drafted in Indonesia with three main purposes: 1.) to map the violations experienced by sexual and gender minorities, 2.) to clearly articulate the relevance of international human rights laws in these cases, and 3.) to outline the obligations of states in applying human rights law (Lee 2011:152). The Yogyakarta Principles directly address certain familial rights and the obligation of the state to implement them. For example, Principle 24 states that “Everyone has the right to found a family regardless of sexual orientation or gender identity. Families exist in diverse forms. No family may be subjected to discrimination on the basis of the sexual orientation or gender identity of any of its members” (Yogyakarta Principles.org). This principle serves to strengthen the loopholes that are present in existing international human rights documents. For example, the American Convention on Human Rights, drafted in 1969 by the OAS (Organization of American States), elaborated the “Rights of the Family” under Article 17. This article points out that, among other protections, the right to marry and found a family shall be recognized “if they meet the conditions required by domestic laws” (OAS.org). While the treaty does elaborate that domestic laws cannot override principles of nondiscrimination established in the covenant, the covenant does not specifically list gender or sexual orientation as a protected status. Again, what we see is silence opening the door to exclusion from legal protections. A similar silence can be read between the lines of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) Article 16, which states that “Men and women of full age, without any limitation due to race, nationality or religion, have the right to marry and to found a family. They are entitled to equal rights as to marriage, during marriage and at its dissolution” (UDHR 2011). Similarly, again, Article 23 of the ICCPR states that “the right of men and women of marriageable age to marry and found a family shall be recognized” (ICCPR 2011). We see here that while race, nationality and religion

are explicitly protected, gender and sexual minorities are relegated to the dangerous position of individual legal interpretations.

Another explanation, for the absence of human rights claims in protecting many queer families in the U.S., is that the collective understanding of “human rights” is a collection of covenants and treaties that only apply to gross rights violations suffered by victims in distant lands. Couple this with the lack of receptivity of most domestic courts to a human rights framework and international law, and you have a system where appeals to human rights protections are not likely to produce results (Mertus 2007:1063). Indeed, the discrepancy between the collective image of the United States as a protector of human rights and the domestic violation of very basic rights for LGBTQ people has been noted by numerous scholars who focus on transgender issues (Califia 2003, Lapovsky-Kennedy 2005, Thamindjis 2005). “American Exceptionalism” is something that becomes quite apparent as we examine the gap between rhetoric and practice in domestic and foreign policy in the United States. In the following passage, Elizabeth Lapovsky-Kennedy writes of the tension faced by the United States in a dizzying balancing act, promoting human rights internationally on one hand and failing to protect them domestically on the other.

“The United States government presents itself as a guiding light in promoting freedom, a freedom ensured and protected by human rights, but the U.S. has at best a contradictory record with regard to human rights, particularly in relation to issues of gender and sexuality. For example, in its role of promoting freedom and protecting human rights, the U.S. has recently granted asylum in a number of cases, some promoted with a particularly high profile in which those applying for asylum did so on the basis of threats against their person in the form of ‘genital mutilation’ or ‘gender violence’. Without the same high profile, the U.S. has also begun granting asylum in some cases based on the persecution of sexual minorities. At the same time, the U.S. maintains a number of regressive policies on these same issues.” (2005:247).

This discrepancy between idealization of human rights and the actual ability of American citizens to fully realize all of the rights outlined in international human rights law is surely a

major stumbling block to claiming rights using international human rights instruments.

Certainly, in the countless hours of conversations I engaged in – both formally and informally – human rights were never raised as central to an individual’s sense of entitlement or protections.

There was significantly more interest in movements designed to promote domestic law – most

notably in the areas of health and employment. Phillip Thamindjis writes extensively on the

“symbiotic relationship” between international norms and domestic legal systems. In his view,

“domestic laws are not only needed to implement international norms, but are essential in

overcoming the equivocations and silences of international human rights law as it has

traditionally applied to GLBT communities” (2005:10). He emphasizes the fact that

international norms are, in essence ‘brought to life’ through domestic legal systems. What this

leads to, however, is a significant gap in the recognition of culturally bounded terms like

“family” and “marriage” for all individuals, when specific domestic laws and customs allow for

discrimination based on gender and sexuality. Tahmindjis writes that, “despite the expressed

inalienability and universality of human rights for all people, this procedure of enforcement is

hamstrung in the way in which it privileges States over humans” (2005:12). He points to explicit

symbiosis where phrases such as “according to law” or “prescribed by law” are used to limit the

rights of certain classes of individuals. For example, Article 22 of the ICCPR is specifically

made subject to restrictions that are prescribed by law and security or public safety.

In essence, the domestic legal system is in the privileged position of deciding who is human

enough to claim their human rights. It is only after a group of persons is regarded as a family by

the State that protections are applied. Thamindjis, therefore, suggests a diversity approach to the

application of human rights, which must begin through challenging domestic law. He writes:

“Instead of an approach which simply tolerates diversity, we need to develop one which actually

values diversity. However, resorting to a fundamental principle of valuing diversity alone will not solve this problem. But it may be one way of forging space in legal (and social) discourse so that silence is no longer the predominant circumstance, enabling heterosexism to remain the privileged viewpoints. This must start with local activism challenging domestic laws” (2005:25). It should therefore come as little surprise that American groups lobbying for transgender rights have done so with a primary focus on domestic, rather than international, rights claims. This proves especially challenging in the United States, which is characterized by a patchwork of state laws where transgender rights are granted and denied on a state-by-state and sometimes case-by-case basis. This lack of uniformity at the state, federal, and international levels leaves many wondering if transgender people are human enough for human rights (Currah 2006).

### **Dignity and Rights**

To be recognized as human, with inherent worth and inalienable value, is central to dignity. As Wiktor Osiatynski explains, “ ‘Inherent Dignity’ signifies a kind of intrinsic worth that belongs equally to all human beings as such, constituted by certain intrinsically valuable aspects of being human” (2009:189). The protection of human dignity is foundational in the field of human rights and serves as the *raison d’être* for the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) and the numerous international treaties and covenants that fortify human rights law. The relationship between rights and dignity is a complex one; but this relationship must be explored to understand the role that legal policy, human rights rhetoric, and power relations structure the way that transgender people navigate choices and form families.

In Osiatynski’s detailed explanation of rights and dignity, he states that an indicator of dignity is the ability to claim rights. His argument is critical to understanding the power differentials that

are inherent in transgender people's engagement with the law, and highlights the ways in which legal invisibility is damaging to dignity and makes rights claims impossible. In *Human Rights and Their Limits*, Osiatynski makes a distinction between "claiming" and "petitioning" for needs and desires. He writes that "Without rights, people can ask, petition, or beg those who make the decisions in matters that influence their lives – but they are not able to claim. Such methods all imply the weaker position of the petitioner, encouraging servility or manipulation" (2009:206). When rights are not explicitly protected by law, the pleas for justice - and even the recognition of humanity and dignity - is up to the one with the power to decide. The outcome is never certain; and asking often entails the risk of having certain rights denied. We have seen earlier in this chapter that this is often a stark reality for transgender people who find themselves in legal battles – for property acquisition, child custody, or marital status. With little precedence in the court system for their full recognition of parental and family rights, transpeople fear that they will face not only legal discrimination but also social prejudice from lawyers, judges, and others who hold the authority to enforce legal decisions. This signifies a power imbalance that denies an individual the ability to claim concrete rights. As Osiatynski reminds us, "Claiming...reflects a basic equality of situations, despite the actual (and often desirable) differences in social position or the existing structure of decision making and power" (2009:208). It is this shift in power – a move from claimer to petitioner - that is most significantly damaging to the dignity of transpeople within the legal system.

Interestingly, this shift in power can be seen in the kinship sphere as well. When an individual transitions from one gender to another, there is often a shift from being able to "claim" kinship connections and family ties to "petitioning" for them. When we see this pattern in both domestic and legal connections, it points to an important shift in power balances at the point of transition.

Foucault's notion of "diffuse power" certainly comes to mind – where power is not wielded in an all-encompassing battle between oppressor and oppressed, but within the much more subtle daily interactions that structure lives and routines. As he notes, "I am not referring to Power with a capital 'P', dominating and imposing its rationality upon the totality of the social body. In fact, there are power relations. They are multiple; they have different forms, they can be in play in family relations, or an institution, or an administration" (1980:98). What unfolds as an individual transitions gender is a shift in the homeostasis of power relations from micro to macro interactions. In relationships where power is greatly skewed, an individual's dignity is threatened. Legal rights and recognition for transgender people, and the collective realization that transpeople are embedded in rather than situated outside of family and kinship connections, is essential not only for restoring a limited equilibrium to power balances but also for ensuring that rights can be claimed with dignity and the full realization of humanity. Human rights play an important role in shaping norms that impact day-to-day interactions. Osiatynski makes an important observation: "It seems that the very concept of human rights plays an important role as a mechanism that helps to legalize changes to moral standards. Such changes usually begin with a group of people who are either dissatisfied with the normative constraints of a time or seek acceptance for new lifestyles and freedoms" (2009:204). This is why, in an examination of human rights, the way that various identity categories are portrayed in popular, academic and legal rhetoric is of the utmost importance. A collective positive portrayal of transgender people can lead to a significant expansion of both rights and dignity. Alternatively, a collectively negative portrayal of trans identity can have the opposite effect. Discourse is directly related to power. Osiatynski drives this point home as he quotes Maurice Cranston, who observed that "the moral claims of today are often the legal rights of tomorrow" (Cranston 1973:82 *in* 2009:204).

## **Conclusion: Morality, Dignity, Family and the Law**

Moral claims linking the LGBT community to family and the powerful concept of “family values” can be highlighted in a very recent Human Rights event. To mark “International Human Rights Day” on December 10<sup>th</sup>, 2014, the United Nations Core Group on Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender (LGBT) Rights created an event under the banner “Love is a Family Value”. The event’s description on a promotional flier noted: “This event will explore the role family plays in the lives of LGBT people around the world, as well as themes of acceptance and family diversity”. This attempt to create a positive association between ‘family’ and the LGBT community is one that we saw frequently during various Marriage Equality campaigns in the United States. Groups such as “Love Makes a Family” in Connecticut lobbied for same sex marriage with the mission of strengthening love and family bonds and attempting to expand the notion of what constituted the culturally-loaded terms of “marriage” and “family”.

While many of these movements were tremendously successful in changing state laws and gaining the recognition of same sex marriages, the transgender population was largely underrepresented in public campaigns. For example, the marriage equality served to expand legal recognition of lesbian and gay families and even provided security to the legal status of transpeoples’ marriages during and after transition. However, the focus during the majority of Marriage Equality campaigns was on uniting lesbian and gay couples and lacked a strong emphasis on trans people and their relationships. As a result, there is much more work that needs to be done – in academic circles, legal circles, political circles, and in public discourse – to create stronger associations with trans people and the families they constitute. When a man comes out to his parents as “gay”, he remains a son and becomes a “gay son.” When a woman comes out to her parents as “lesbian”, she remains a daughter and becomes a “lesbian daughter.”

When a transwoman comes out to her parents as “female”, she ceases being a son and must petition her parents to recognize her as a “daughter”. She finds herself in a liminal status that is specific to individuals undergoing transition. The power balance has dramatically shifted. That same liminality carries over to her legal status, where she must petition for rights and recognition rather than claim them. Invisibility in family discourse and invisibility in the law prove to be two realms of existence where transpeople find their dignity challenged, and the power balance that once characterized their relationships greatly altered.

It is in the void of recognition, in the absence of concrete and well defined rights to claim, that a human rights focus becomes central to the preservation of dignity. As we discussed earlier in this chapter, family serves as the ‘humanizing site’ where the “other” becomes recognizable. That recognition as a family member – and ultimately as an individual who is human enough for human rights- is something many people take for granted. However, in the aftermath of revealing one’s gender identity – when the balance of power has been significantly altered – the significant moral and humanizing weight of kinship and family symbolism is essential to the preservation of dignity. The recognition and preservation of dignity is foundational to human rights. If, as the promoters of the Human Rights Day flier asserted that love is a ‘family value’, then it must also be said that family – and more specifically, the recognition that one belongs to a family – is a human right. By recognizing it as such, we can work to further the consolidation of “transgender” and “family” identities, work to overcome power imbalances, and work to allow individuals to claim their rights in both the legal and social realms of interaction.

## **CONCLUSION: KINSHIP, POWER, AND THE ARITHMETIC OF TRANSITION**

Embarking on my fieldwork journey, I sought to uncover patterns in changing kinship connections as individuals transitioned from one gender identity to another. My research consisted of in-depth interviews, participant observation at various support group meetings, attendance at social events for transgender people, observation of online interactions, and attendance at conferences and workshops. At each site, I observed, explored and examined how people made connections and disconnections with those they considered relatives, as well as how people made connections and disconnections with those they did not. I strived, as Judith Modell (1994) urged, to learn the “story” of what it means to be related.

Conceptually, I used a power-centric approach to studying transgender relationships, which carefully examines and analyzes the ways in which relationships are constructed and dismantled, experienced and ranked in relation to one another. As I detailed in the introduction, I performed a nuanced analysis of human relationships that is focused less on what “makes” kinship connections and more on how people see the role of kinship in their lives and experiences.

Through my analyses, it becomes apparent that relational dynamics change in ways that are less about changes in specific kinship connections and more about shifts in the power dynamics that are embedded in relationships. The “story” is about power. As we have seen in the realm of family, friendship, community and law, that relational shift in power consistently left the transgender individual in the inferior position of statuslessness and disempowerment.

Transitioning from one gender to another disrupts the culturally held assumption that gender will remain static throughout one’s lifetime, and disturbs gender norms. This can, and often does, lead to confusion, discomfort and potential hostility from family, friends, and society. The

resistance encountered by transgender people when attempting to renegotiate a place in their kinship, friendship and social networks, following transition, reinforces Seidman's insistence that "gender norms are not primarily upheld by laws, but by institutions...and the daily customs and practices in family and peer groups" (2005:236). The policing of gender norms has significant consequences for transgender people in nearly every sphere of interaction in their daily lives.

As was noted in the opening chapter, formally recognized kinship connections have the greatest potential to become sites of significant power imbalances and contestations. Transitioning gender often implies giving up the power to claim family ties. Transpeople find themselves without a concrete status in the kinship system – in a liminal space where rights, roles, and duties must be renegotiated and petitioned for. Some renegotiations are positive while others entail a great deal of loss and distress. In nearly all cases, however, the renegotiation of kinship ties requires transpeople to relinquish the power to define themselves within the larger kinship network and to wait for their kin to accept them (or not) in the context of their new gender identity.

Contestations of power could be seen in the refusal to use a transgender son or daughter's preferred titles or pronouns. These refusals were often easily excused or forgiven by transgender respondents, who often excused these refusals on the account of "habit" or "forgetfulness". Maintaining bonds that were valued as family ties became more important than having "ideal" interactions with a parent. Respondents who were married at the time of transition also noted a significant shift in power relations between themselves and their spouse at the point of revealing their gender identity. Contestations of power, in the domain of marital relationships, took the form of either divorce (which was almost always initiated by the cisgender partner) or the tight

regulation of a transgender person's body modifications and gender expression by the cisgender spouse.

For respondents who had children, there was a great deal of tension around changing the terms of “mother” or “father”. The majority of participants handed the decisive power to their children. No children of the respondents that I interviewed crossed gender lines in using parental terms. For example, children whose fathers transitioned to female did not begin calling her “Mom”. Sally Hines (2007) reported a similar reluctance to cross gendered parenting terminology. Additionally, adult children sometimes chose to limit or cut off contact from their transgender parent. When contact was maintained, it was often the transgender parent who initiated contact and coordinated visits. While the individual outcomes and family dynamics that resulted in gender transition varied from individual to individual, a significant shift in power balances characterized formally recognized kin connections. The majority of transpeople I spent time with, throughout the course of my fieldwork, cherished their position as family members and valued their kinship relations.

Traditionally recognized kin relationships - webs of association with mothers and fathers, sisters and brothers, sons and daughters, aunts and uncles, husbands and wives – held the greatest imbalance of power relations; and they held a high likelihood of rejection and betrayal, yet were simultaneously the relationships transpeople held as most important to them and viewed as the most authentic and enduring relationships. Transgender people were very likely to ignore or excuse power contestations in their attempt to maintain the kinship ties they held very central to their identity and family connections. Many individuals I spoke with in interviews, meetings, and workshops emphasized the fact that they wanted to be seen - first and foremost – as loving family members. There is a definite power in the hegemonic symbols of formal kinship ties – of

being a mother, a father, a daughter, or a son, a husband, or a wife – that carry significant moral and humanizing weight. The recognition of an individual as “part of a family” rather than “apart from” family can significantly change the ways in which they are perceived and seen as a recognizable “other” in our society. There are significant consequences for being seen as a relative (or not) on the levels of empowerment and dignity.

In Chapter Two, we explored friendship as a relationship that entailed intimacy and care, void of collectively recognized or formal kin titles. While such relationships were often rooted in shared histories and experiences, they lacked the cultural and legal power of ties rooted in “substance” and “code” (Schneider 1980, Strathern 2005). These relationships were significantly more balanced in terms of power; and they displayed very few, if any, contestations of power. While transgender respondents often defined “kinship” as any relationship where support and love were given freely, there was a marked reluctance to classify relationships outside of formally recognized family ties as “kin”. It was easy to observe a marked tendency to preface all discussions of a friend’s loyalty or dedication with the term “like family” – denoting a conscious distinction between relatives who are reckoned based on blood and marital relations, and friends who are bound by affinity and nurturance alone. This observation aligns with Rayna Rapp’s (1987) assertion that any affective ties forged outside of the dominant Western notion of the nuclear family will be forever relegated to “secondary status”. Lenke (2008) also noted a divide between “unmarked” families who were viewed as authentic, and “marked” families who always required a clarifying term (same-sex families, step-families, adoptive families). This view of informal ties of nurturance and affinity as second-class is likely the reason that many respondents, despite having a more equal balance of power and greater levels of acceptance in relationships that fell under the umbrella of “friendship”, still privileged their membership in

formal kinship networks above all else. Friendship proves to be, as Anna Muraco noted, “the most flexible and the most tenuous of social relationships” (2006:1313). While these relationships do not hold the same power asymmetry as formally and legally recognized family ties, they also do not contain the same symbolic or emotional force.

Chapter Three brings up a different site of power asymmetry, in a discussion on transgender people and their association with one another in small scale support groups and in large scale collective discourses on what transgender identity entails. While many respondents found comfort in the collective notion of other individuals who shared their struggles, many found collective notions of transgender existence as too essentializing and limiting. Many individuals challenged the idea of being narrowly defined by their gender identity, and made attempts in their narratives to highlight the reasons they were too ‘multidimensional’ and ‘complex’ to fit the hegemonic conceptualization of what a transgender person should be. There was a certain tension and even frustration on the part of transgender people concerning who was “truly” transgender and who was not. For some, the narrow limits set by dominant discourse on transgender identity proved to be constricting and limiting. For others, there was frustration with people who “ruined” the image of transpeople with “outrageous” behaviors or dress.

Both of these critiques pointed to a site of power and contestation that sits at the heart of any identity-based group: the power to be a “gatekeeper” and set the terms for membership. The feeling of being roped into an artificial community was a point of contention for many respondents, who preferred to distance themselves from an association with an overly simplistic transgender collective. Large scale conceptions of transgender identity were critiqued as too essentializing and ‘too political’ for many respondents. There was a contestation of identities and definitions that were crafted *about* them in the popular discourse on transgender lives, rather

than the identities and definitions that they created themselves. This power asymmetry was challenged through the creation of smaller collectives outside of larger support groups or movements. These smaller coalitions were described by respondents as based on more than a one-dimensional aspect of identity. An additional place where people found a relatively balanced power equilibrium was in online groups and forums, which were seen as both informative and open to direct participation.

While these smaller associations seemed more inclusive and responsive to agency, they were not completely unproblematic. Access to any type of transgender group had specific barriers and obstacles. The locations where I conducted my fieldwork were relatively remote areas in Connecticut and Massachusetts. Even in support groups held in larger city centers, public transportation was limited, if existent at all. It became apparent that there were not only philosophical and identity-based barriers to participation, but there were physical and logistical ones as well. Racial and economic factors also complicated full participation in local community groups, leading to a group composition that was made up primarily of white, middle-class participants. If one were to conceptualize the power of “showing up” in creating the definitions and terms of what membership means, this demographic may serve as discouragingly limited in scope.

Transgender respondents viewed participation in transgender groups and participation in family groups as dramatically different spheres of relationality, with competing domains of relationships and unique power differentials. In kinship relations, they found themselves disempowered and at the mercy of family members with the power to either accept or reject them as fellow kin. In transgender group relations, they found themselves essentialized and defined solely by their

gender identities. This attention to collective imagery and identity carries over to how transgender people view their place in the relationship between family, law, and human rights.

Chapter Four covered the analysis of legal and rights discourse as a site of power that is situated in a larger framework of kinship, identity and citizenship. Understanding the relationship between law and family is central to understanding how certain relationships come to be privileged over others. Legal recognition of family forms lends a power and legitimacy that cannot be minimized in the privileging of some family forms as more stable and enduring than others. Legally recognized and validated relationships have rights and protections that informal relationships lack. For transgender people, gaps in legal protections and recognition lead to “power vacuums” with uncertain outcomes and a high likelihood of discrimination.

In the realm of family law, there is no guarantee that a transgender person will receive the full recognition of their parental and familial rights. They are often exposed to the same discrimination in the courtroom as they are exposed to in more informal social interactions.

While law often crafts conceptions of the “good” or the “bad” citizen, transgender people often feel that they are “invisible” citizens. As transgender people move from one gender to another, they often find themselves in a state of legal limbo - a liminal stage where rights can no longer be claimed or guaranteed but must be petitioned for instead. This is strikingly similar to the power differentials entailed in familial relationships, when individuals lose their right to claim a place in kinship networks and must instead petition for recognition.

This difference between “claiming” rights and “petitioning for” them is the difference between having one’s dignity recognized or having it denied (Osiatynski 2009). Some may suggest turning to the arena of international human rights to ensure the rights of transgender people and

protection in the arena of kinship and family law. While the ideals outlined by the Yogyakarta Principles and the ICCPR may be appealing, a myriad of factors including “American Exceptionalism”, a lack of court receptivity to international doctrines, and the collective conception that human rights belong to people in “far off places” prevent the enforcement of international human rights law in the United States. What human rights law can provide, however, is an important set of norms that explicitly outline rights for marginalized populations and emphasize the inherent dignity of each and every individual on the basis of their common humanity.

What I came to understand in my analysis of gender transition was that transgender people develop an “arithmetic of transition” based on careful and individualized calculations of their perceived risk in the social and legal spheres, weighted against the emotional and internal strife of keeping one’s true gender identity a secret. When individuals felt that gender disclosure posed a high risk – either through loss of family relationships or legal discrimination – gender transition would be delayed until the physical and psychological consequences of not transitioning were so high that the transperson hit a crisis point. For many of my respondents, the risks of entering into social and legal situations, where the power relations were “stacked against them”, were so high that they did not come out until they reached a “breaking point” that in most cases was a suicidal episode. The life or death consequences of such an arithmetic point to the centrality of finding ways to ameliorate the negative consequences of transitioning, and thus lower the perceived risks involved.

In closing my analysis of transgender kinship and power, I believe that it is important to work toward developing ways to ensure that transgender people can be portrayed in a relational context that allows for their empowerment and the protection of their dignity. My analysis of the

lived experience of transgender people, as they navigated the social relationships that impacted their daily lives, revealed it is not being treated unkindly by family that is the most damaging aspect of transgender identity and dignity. After all, many tensions in relationships, at the most intimate level, do not lead to the severance of kinship ties. What transgender people found the most devastating and damaging was to be portrayed as outside of the family – in both popular and legal discourse. Being taken out of the fold of family, in which powerful shared symbolism serves to simplify and humanize relationships, caused the most harm to transpeople in their ability to claim rights and preserve dignity. Anthropology is well suited to expand collective understanding of what kinship and family means to transgender people, and understanding of how they conceptualize and structure their relationships to others. The discipline’s nuanced approach to studying relationships from the insider’s point of view, and a perspective on the historical and global diversity of what constitutes relatedness, provides an essential dimension in attempts to understand the “story” of what it means to be related, and to understand how those relationships structure identity, humanity, dignity and belonging.

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