

Perceived Identity Change in the Male Partners of Trans people, as a Result of Being in a Trans Relationship: A Study Utilising Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

Submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements of the New School of Psychotherapy and Counselling and the Psychology Department of Middlesex University for the Degree of Doctor by Professional Studies: validated pathway DPsych Existential Psychotherapy and Counselling

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Acknowledgements

It is said that the qualities that are required to get through medical school and residency are: Discipline. Patience. Perseverance. A willingness to forgo sleep. A penchant for sadomasochism. Ability to weather crises of faith and self-confidence. Accept exhaustion as a fact of life. Addiction to caffeine a definite plus. Unfailing optimism that the end is in sight (Khaled Hosseini).

Despite this not being medical school and residency, and despite me managing to beat my caffeine addiction (it was no longer working anymore anyway) I very much related to every one of these attributes in the 6 years I have spent completing this thesis. I however feel that I was lacking one of them, as I don't feel that I can say that I have had unfailing optimism that the end was in sight at any point. This was even when the end was actually close. This was because it was so hard to see past the next hurdle each time and therefore have the imagination to visualise myself actually making it to the end. I therefore would like to thank the people who did believe in me and could visualise this on my behalf, during my crises of faith. Your kind words of encouragement must have sunk in on some level as now I'm here! I would not have completed this thesis without the help of many these include: My family who have offered me both emotional and financial support. My friends and work colleagues, who have listened to me complaining about various aspects of the research process. I am extremely grateful to my supervisors Dr Werner Kierski and Dr Patricia Bonnici, for their guidance and valuable feedback and also Dr Gillian Proctor who supervised me at the earlier stages of the research process. I would like to thank all NSPC classmates, particularly those who I completed research

based modules with, as the peer group pressure and encouragement for people in a similar situation was invaluable. I would like to thank all the tutors that have taught me through the years, as in every module something research related came up. I would like to thank Dawn Farrow and Sasha Smith for being the two constant friendly faces, who seem to know the answer to everything or will find out if they don't, as well as all the others at the NSPC office. I would like to acknowledge the support and attention to detail given to me by my dyslexia study skills support worker, Jo Bicknell. Despite only being diagnosed with dyslexia a few years ago, I now cannot imagine doing anything academic without this support, although I am getting there with English! Perhaps most importantly I would like to say thank you to the participants, for taking the risk to come forward and to share their experiences with me, in such an open and honest way. I was very stressed at certain points that I would not be able to find enough people, so thanks for not making that an unsurmountable problem for me.

Abstract

This thesis examines how cisgender males' identities are affected as a result of their participation in a romantic relationship with a trans-person. This research looks specifically at the experience of cisgender partners who were unaware of their partner's trans-identity at the start of the relationship. Therefore, people who have had to negotiate their identity within their relationship in ways that they did not expect. Male partners were chosen due to the lack of representation of their experiences in the literature on trans partnerships, as there are no studies that specifically focused on this group. Nine participants were interviewed using semi-structured interviews which focused on their experiences of being in a romantic relationship with a trans person. All of the participants were white, male, and aged between 18 and 73; eight were American and one was British. Personal comments were incorporated throughout in order to add a reflective aspect to the study. The resulting data was analysed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). Seven superordinate themes were identified, related to the participants' ways of adapting to their partner's transition and to the extent to which they renegotiated their own identity in response to this. The first of these concerns the different types of losses that a partner may experience. The second identifies the different ways of making sense of the experience. The third highlights the different coping strategies that the participants employed. The fourth describes the shifting of perspective that participants seemed to adopt in response to their partners' transition, resulting in a broader view of themselves and others. The fifth describes the participants' understanding of the shift in their identity. The sixth theme relates to the different benefits that the participants learned to embrace as a result of their relationship. The

final theme concerns the influence of culture on the participants' experiences. Existing literature from a number of sources within and outside the trans partnership field, were used to discuss the wider implication of the findings. The findings can be said to give a voice to a hidden minority group in society in the absence of published research on male partners' experiences. The clinical significance of this study includes recommendations for the increased awareness of not just the challenges that partners of trans people may encounter but also of the positive aspects of this experience. These findings have significance to many potential areas in which assumptions may exist about the cisgender partner's experience, such as LGBT centres, counselling psychology or health care settings. There are many potential directions for future studies, such as longitudinal studies that could explore partners' changing experiences of their relationship over time, which would avoid the limitation of people reporting their experience in retrospect, coloured by their current circumstances and priorities.

Key Words

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis, (IPA), Cisgender male partners of trans people, Identity change in romantic relationships, Identity, transgender, Identity loss/renegotiation, being-in-the-world-with-others, existential perspectives on romantic relationships.

Statement of Authorship

This dissertation is written by Paul Rankeillor and has ethical clearance from the New School of Psychotherapy and Counselling and the Psychology Department of Middlesex University. It is submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements of the New School of Psychotherapy and Counselling and the Psychology Department of Middlesex University for the Degree of Doctor of Counselling Psychology by Professional Studies: validated pathway Dpsych Existential Psychotherapy and Counselling. I can confirm that it has not been submitted elsewhere in any other form for the fulfilment of any other degree or qualification. I as the author of this piece of work report no conflicts of interest, and I am alone responsible for the content and writing of the dissertation, and all this entailed, for instance planning the research project, interviewing the participants and interpreting the data.

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Anonymisation

I hereby confirm that in the interests of protecting the confidentiality of the participants that all transcripts included in this document have been edited to remove any identifiable information. This includes such information as work place location, city of residence, name of partner etcetera. The participants are identified through pseudonyms used throughout the study to further protect their confidentiality.

Transcript Notations

... significant pause

[] material and/or name omitted

[laughing] additional material or my summary

Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Overview of Topic

This research examines how cisgender males' identities are affected as a result of their participation in a romantic relationship with a trans-person. For the purposes of this study a trans person is considered to be anyone who experiences 'gender dysphoria*', with their birth gender, to the extent to which they consider themselves to be transgender. Cisgender by contrast refers to someone whose sense of gender identity is congruent with the gender they were assigned at birth. This research looks at the experience of cisgender males who were unaware of their partner's trans-identity at the start of the relationship. Therefore, their partner's subsequent disclosure of a trans-identity, will have presumably led them to negotiate their identity within their relationship in ways that they did not expect (Brown 2009; Brown 2010; Forde 2011; Joslin-Roher & Wheeler, 2009). This research focuses on the experiences of male participants who are partnered with Male to Female (MTF), Female to Male (FTM) or non-binary identifying trans-individuals. Male partners were chosen due to the lack of representation of their experiences in the literature on trans partnerships, as there are no studies that have specifically focused on this group.

1.2 Definition of Terms: Trans, Transgender and Transitioning

Before going any further it is important to define exactly what is meant by the terms Trans, Transgender and Transitioning, so that the reader is orientated to the nature of the particular phenomena under study. In this study the term 'trans' is preferred over that of transsexual or transgender. This is due to it including a wider range of experiences on the gender continuum. For example, the term trans encompasses the terms transsexual, transgender, transvestite and other forms of gender variance (Bernstein, 1994, Feinberg, 1996, O'Keefe & Fox, 1997, as cited in Bilodeau & Renn, 2005). Transgender refers to anyone who feels that their psychological sense of gender does not match the biological sex to which they were born. Included in this are transsexual individuals who, due to this incongruence, plan to transition from one sex to another (Forde, 2011).

Transitioning more specifically refers to the process by which trans people initiate various changes that allow them to change from their birth gender to the gender that they more strongly identify with (University of Winchester Gender Identity and Reassignment Guidance, 2014). This is defined specifically as a process instead of an event, as it may take several months or years for an individual to complete. It can involve the social aspects of disclosure to friends and family of a trans identity, living in the role of the identified gender, pronoun and name changes, and the physiological changes associated with hormone therapy and sex reassignment surgery.

**It is important to note that gender dysphoria is now an increasing contested term in the transgender field due to its emphasising that being transgender is akin to a mental illness. However, the term is kept within the definition presented here due to its widespread usage in clinical settings, and due to it being commonly used by the partners of trans people to explain certain phenomena that their trans partners experience.*

It is important however to acknowledge that transition may mean different things to different people, in their endeavour to become 'outwardly more aligned with their internal sense of gender. It may not necessarily involve undergoing particular aspects of the process such as full or partial sex reassignment surgery (Brown & Rounsley, 1996). In this study the trans people who are partnered with the participants can be at various stages of the transition process. However, similarly to Forde (2009) they must have disclosed their trans identity to significant others and have made social changes, such as change of pronoun. This is to allow their trans identity to have explicitly affected their relationships with others.

1.3 Reasons for Conducting the Research

The topic of trans partnership was chosen as the focus of this thesis for several reasons. Firstly, its relevance to the existential approach, the area in which I practise, as well as its relevance to counselling psychology as a whole. These and other reasons are elucidated through this introduction. However, it is pertinent to explain my personal motivations.

Secondly, due to having a personal experience of this topic as a partner of a trans person in a past relationship, my awareness of the way in which trans issues can impact on a cis-gender partner was greatly heightened. My partner at this time had not made any transition related physical changes and was therefore seen by the rest of the world as their birth gender. This raised the issue of how much of an impact even the initial disclosure of a trans-identity can have on a partner, in terms of negotiating their own identity and the relationship in general. In terms of

my relationship, the disclosure occurred before the romantic aspect of the relationship had begun, and therefore I entered this relationship with a certain amount of awareness of what I might experience. However, the relationship still faced many complications related to my partner being trans and there were many aspects that were still unknown and uncertain – for example, what trajectory the transition process would follow and how this would be experienced. This experience made me question how much more challenging this process might be for someone who entered the relationship unknowingly. This provided the inspiration to delve into this topic and in doing so it was discovered that while the literature concerning the trans person themselves is ever growing (Brown, 2010), the topic of trans partnerships from the non-transitioning partner's perspective is still largely unexplored (Meier et al. 2013). Despite this, blogs and biographies of partners' personal experiences indicate that the partners of trans people represent a highly diverse group of people, who are going through their own transition in parallel to their partner (for examples see Boyd, 2007; Cantons, 2012; Rozek, 2016).

This emphasised that the partners of trans people are a group in society who have not adequately been given a voice by the research, and that this is a very fertile subject for exploration. This is especially the case with male partners; as they are a particularly understudied population there is a lack of knowledge with regards to how they may cope differently with their partner's transition (Brown, 2010).

1.4 Change and Adaption in Relationships

This study explores change in relationships, for example the extent to which we compromise and adapt our identity in response to being in a romantic relationship with another person, as well as the factors that influence whether relationships will survive through adversity. Looking at trans relationships is one way of explicitly examining this phenomenon, although it could be argued that this can happen in any relationship, albeit to a lesser extent. In particular this study can be seen as a way to explore how someone copes with being in a relational situation that they did not predict before entering the relationship, and therefore something that could be said they had not 'signed up for'. Nevertheless, there are many other situations where this can happen, for example partners of people who become injured, disabled or impaired in some way at some point after the relationship begins. This could include the partners of people who experience traumatic brain injury (Willer et al. 1991: Dickson, et. al. 2010: Godwin, Chappell & Kreutzer, 2014), the partners of people with spinal cord injuries (Rena, Moshe & Abraham, 1996) or the partners of people with acquired deafness (Hill, 2015). While this is in no manner suggesting that being trans is akin to having a disability, the adaption that the partner of a disabled person makes, if they decide to stay in the relationship, has parallels to the trans partner's experience. For example, renegotiating their identity in response to their changing relationship from sexual partner to care giver, and the way partners may feel the need to put on a 'brave face', or experience a sense of bereavement. Therefore, looking at the experience of partners of trans people can help to shed light on this more general experience of adaption and compromise that people may make, as well as the consequences that these have for them. From a personal point of view this is one of my main reasons for conducting this research, as I feel that I made many compromises and adaptations in my relationship with a trans person.

Looking back on this I realise that I compromised too much as I felt that I lost myself for a period of time. However, while certain aspects of this were triggered by my partner being trans, it is also something that I feel could be a general tendency for me in relationships, particularly those that are challenging in some way.

Such adaptations which couples make in relationships could be in response to relationship 'turning points' which, Baxter and Bullis (1986) define as "any events or occurrence that is associated with change in relationship" (cited in Brody et. al 2013). These can be considered as transformative events, due to the opportunity that they provide for change, in the individuals concerned and in their commitment towards the relationship (Conville, 1987 as cited, in Brody et. al 2013). Specifically to trans relationships, such an event could be their partner's disclosure that they are trans. This could be considered a significant potential turning point as a large-scale online survey suggests that around only half (48.78%) of partners respond positively to their trans partner coming out over the long term and 1 in 5 partners leave the relationship (Kirk-Roberson, www.t.vox.org). This current study investigates firstly what events they view as significant turning points and secondly how these are negotiated.

1.5 Transgender Issues and Society

In recent years there has been an increasing visibility of trans-people in society, with a greater number of them transitioning to their desired gender. This means that the number of partners of trans people is growing as well (Brown, 2010). It is important to note that in the seven years or so since this research began there have been many changes in the transgender field with this topic becoming more

embedded in mainstream culture. This can be said to be a double-edged sword; on the one hand, it opens a dialogue on the topic and allows people to feel they can more freely express their identities, and on the other it has led the subject to become politicised with increased potential for public concern. This means that it has more potential to provoke powerful feelings and controversial opinions in particular groups or individuals. This has progressed to the point where it has been described as a moral panic that is dividing society (Alston, 2018).

To help put this into context, the growing scope of this issue in the five years between 2012 and 2017 has seen a fourfold increase in the number of children being referred to gender identity clinics (Turner, 2014). While this might not be directly related to trans partnerships it seems to relate to a wider cultural zeitgeist, in which gender is something which people are encouraged to question (Turner, 2017). These children are also potentially the future generation of trans people who will engage in romantic partnerships, therefore the number of partners is likely to increase.

More specifically in relation to trans partnerships, with the greater acceptance of trans identity and the increased utilisation of legal protections (Section 7 of the Equality Act, 2010) there seems to be an idea increasingly present, in media and academia, that people should date or be attracted to people who are trans, otherwise this constitutes discrimination (see Vrangalova, 2018; Blair & Hoskin, 2019; Du Cane, 2020, for examples). This is due to the belief that trans people should be seen as the gender they are presenting. In the United Kingdom this was a debate that was triggered by India Willoughby, a transwoman who was a

contestant in Big Brother. As a result of her conversations and interactions with her fellow housemates regarding the topic of dating a trans person, or more accurately refusing to date a trans person based on them being transgender, this debate entered mainstream media, initially trending on the BBC news (Griffin, 2018). Similarly, in America the 'Trans Advocate', a bi-monthly LGBT interest magazine, also addressed this topic (see Tannehill, 2019). In particular, it drew attention to a survey conducted in 2018 that indicated that the general population displays a very low willingness to date trans people (1.8 percent of straight women, and 3.3 percent of straight men), in stark contrast with the popularity of pornography featuring trans people on pornography sites such as Porn Hub. This was used as a basis to reinforce the idea that trans people are discriminated against in the dating world, as it suggests that it is okay to be attracted to a trans person in private, but much less acceptable to display this attraction in a public setting. The author speculated that this could be due to the increased threat to a person's existing sexual orientation if this attraction moved from the private to the public sphere, and therefore led to worries about how they would be viewed by society (Tannehill, 2019). However, it is not only the media which has shown an increased interest in this particular topic as recent academic research has also addressed it – for example Blair & Hoskin (2019). They found that 87.5 percent of their respondents would not date a trans person, which they interpreted as being inherently transphobic (Blair & Hoskin, 2009). Blair and Hoskin did not seem to consider the possibility that people may not be attracted to other people for different reasons, such as more innate biological ones related to cues for sexual attraction (Russell, 2019). Blair and Hoskin (2019) stress that the potential negative effect of this 'discrimination' could be trans people being excluded from

the dating pool, therefore having less opportunity to gain the love and support of a romantic partner, which could promote their wellbeing and self-esteem. How these ideologies and specific cultural contexts affect the experiences of the participants in this study is considered in this research.

1.6 The Need for Research on the Experience of the Partners of Trans People

There are a number of reasons why research is needed on this topic, some of which have already been touched upon. In general however, it is considered important to emphasise the extent to which partners' experiences have been, and are still being, ignored or misrepresented academically and by society at large. Although progress has been made in the appropriate representation of partners' experiences by more modern research, older research has misrepresented this group in ways that may still be influential (Brown, 2010). For example, Fienbloom (1976) stated that female partners of trans-women must either have low self-esteem or be latent lesbians. Research by Huxley, Kenna and Brandon (1981) saw the partners as needing to be delusional in order to feel romantically and sexually satisfied in their trans relationships. They held this belief due to the assumption that these relationships would not have continued to function otherwise. Although some subsequent research has contradicted these ideas, they may still persist to some extent and therefore should be challenged (Brown, 2010). A way to continue to challenge this is through more research in this area on different types of relationships.

Parallel to this acknowledgement there has been an increased awareness of the diversity of the experiences of partners of trans-people. For example, Boyd (2007, p. 32) states that “the range of experience a non-trans person can have in a trans relationship is gigantic”. This is due to the different variables that may be present, such as different genders, sexual orientations and at what stage in the transition process the relationship began. This stresses the need for future research in order to examine the experience of all partners of trans-people to further the understanding of their particular experience (Brown, 2010). It may be particularly important to attempt to do this due to reports from partners indicating how little this complex experience is understood by others.

“We rhapsodize, pontificate and debate whether our identity is tied up with our partner’s, but most partners of trans folks learn we must stop listening to others and find our own ways to navigate an identity that few understand. Sometimes we are an orientation all on our own.” (Anderson-Marshall & Boyd, 2015 pg: XV).

Indeed, the idea that more research and focus is needed to better understand this phenomenon and other lesser known phenomena of human experience is aptly reinforced by this quote written by the partner of a trans person.

“So much silence remains about a wide swathe of human variance and experience, and that silence often feels weightier than words spoken aloud.” (Anderson-Marshall & Boyd, 2015, pg: XV).

It could be argued that a factor to explain why the potential of this subject matter has remained so untapped, is the tendency that still exists for partners to receive far less focus than their transitioning trans partner. Trans people receive more focus and attention than their partners in a wide variety of contexts for example, at transgender conferences, medical settings and in more informal settings. This could be for a number of reasons, for example due to the general fascination that people have with trans people, or the perceived need to advocate for trans' rights. This can lead to a general ignoring of the partners' issues and experiences and partners feeling ignored.

“Everything is always about trans people, trans people, and you know, partners are completely eclipsed, and our sexuality is completely eclipsed, and we have no voice in the community reality. Even when I spoke it just felt like I was some creepy imposter, and had no right to speak on behalf of trans people, and it’s like you know, my sexuality and my person is intricately linked to these people, that have this past or present identity, so therefore I am involved in it, and I am a part of it, you know” (Platt & Bolland, 2018, Disha, pg. 1264).

This suggests the need for more research, which highlights the specific needs and experiences of partners in order to shift the spotlight more onto the partner. From a personal point of view, this lack of research on partner's experiences was one of the first things that I noticed when I tried to educate myself on this topic after my partner came out to me. At this point, not finding any research or information on people who had had a similar experience to me made me feel more alone and disempowered, which is what initially inspired me to choose this topic for my doctoral thesis.

1.7 Relevance to Counselling Psychology

The growing number of trans people and, therefore, the number of partners of trans people, means that that this represents a population with unique needs and experience that counselling psychology may need to address (Brown, 2010). This therefore is a major reason for the research to address this topic, so that more can be discovered about this population. More specifically this topic is relevant to counselling psychology, and therefore important to focus on, for the following reasons.

Firstly, it is relevant due to the greater acknowledgement of the impact that trans issues can have on a partner's sense of identity and the consequent effect on their mental health and wellbeing. A disclosure of trans-identity to a partner and the transition-related phenomena that accompany it seem to provoke a transition for the partner in terms of their own identity (Brown, 2010). Boyd (2007), for example, in an autobiographical account, states the following: "transitioning is not just about one person, when a Trans person is in love, both people are transitioning, each person does it in their own way" (Boyd, 2007, p.42). More specifically in terms of sexual identity, Brown (2010) describes how partners' sexual identities can become incongruent due to their changing self-concept and loss of previous community reference, provoked by their partner's transition. These are areas that people may need to be supported in therapeutically in order to work through them (Meier, et al. 2013).

Secondly, this topic is relevant to counselling psychology due to the acknowledgement that many professionals in the 'trans field' or mental health services in general are largely ignorant of how trans issues affect partnerships. Newman (2012), for example, has highlighted how even professionals in the field of transgender study do not completely comprehend the way the intricacies of trans issues can impact upon a relationship and how partners themselves receive little support. Indeed, until fairly recently there was an assumption present in the literature that the vast majority of trans relationships would end, as a result of the transition process. This assumption was strong enough to influence many professionals to advise trans-people to end long standing relationships as they believed that they were doomed to end anyway (Meyerowitz, 2002, as cited in Meier et al. 2013).

Despite this assumption being weakened by newer research, there is still reason to believe that many of these attitudes persist and this population remains strongly misunderstood (Brown 2012). Brown (2010) highlights the importance of concentrating on partners of trans people, due to them often being an invisible and excluded group, of which mental health services should have more knowledge. It is hoped that specific research in this area could help build a body of literature which is of value to partners and the professionals who may work with them (Califa, 1997).

Finally, this area is particularly topical to counselling psychology due to the increasing visibility of trans-people in society and the number transitioning to their desired gender. This means that the number of partners of trans people is

growing as well. This represents a population with unique needs and experiences that counselling psychology may increasingly need to address (Brown, 2010).

1.8 Various Forms of Identity and the Link to Sexual Fluidity

Before going further it is important to define what it is meant by the term ‘identity’ due to this being the main phenomenon to be explored. The term identity is used in this project in various contexts, including personal identity, gender identity and sexual identity, as all of these forms of identity may have to be renegotiated by a partner of a trans person (Boyd 2007; Bischof et al 2011). Personal identity refers to the personality and characteristics attributed to a person, by themselves or others, which leads to being recognised as the same person, continuously over time (Internet Encyclopaedia of Philosophy). Gender identity refers to an “individual’s internal sense of self, as either male or female, or somewhere between or outside these two categories” (Wilchins, 2002, pg 4). Sexual identity refers to “how one thinks of oneself in terms of whom one is romantically or sexually attracted to” (Reiter, 1989, pg 138). It may also refer to sexual orientation identity. This is when “people identify or dis-identify with a sexual orientation or choose not to identify with a sexual orientation” (Beckstead et al 2009, pg: 17). This, for example, may describe people who identify as homosexual, heterosexual, or bi-sexual. Or equally, it may describe people who choose not to affiliate with a particular sexual orientation, who see themselves as outside these categories. It is pertinent to note that the contemporary use of the term ‘queer’, in the literature, refers to people who regard themselves as outside specific sexual minority categories (Beckstead et al. 2009).

It feels important at this point to distinguish between sexual orientation and sexual orientation identity, and explore the extent to which they differ in relation to sexual fluidity. While there is no general consensus over how sexually fluid humans are, the extent to which we can change or adapt our sexuality, it is generally believed in the scientific community that sexual orientation is more fixed and something that is not chosen by the individual (Frankowski, 2004; Kersey-Matusiak, 2012; Lamanna et al. 2014). However, it is acknowledged that someone's sexual orientation identity, or in other words their relationship towards their orientation, can change throughout their lives, in response to a myriad of social and psychological factors (Rosario, Schrimshaw, Hunter, Braun 2006; Sinclair 2013; Ross, Michael, Essien, Williams, Fernandez-Esquer, 2003). It is therefore important to distinguish between sexual orientation and sexual orientation identity to fully appreciate the phenomenon of sexual fluidity. If someone's sexual identity is seen solely in terms of their sexual orientation then many of the more subtle, but equally significant aspects of their sexual identity may be overlooked.

This is directly relevant to this study, which explores the subtleties of how people may renegotiate their identity in relation to their trans partner, that may or may not involve them changing their sexual orientation. As argued by Aaron (2016), an aspect of this fluidity might be uncovering or discovering an aspect of sexuality that was unrealised or unclaimed before. While it may be difficult to know whether an identity is uncovered or newly formed, this is a topic of direct relevance to this research. Indeed, sexual fluidity can be said to relate directly to the ability of someone to focus more on an individual as a person, or a specific sexual activity as opposed to a person's given gender (Spinelli, 2014), which can be said to be

the very thing that a partner of a trans person is attempting to do. However, with regard to this study which features male participants it may be important to note that the vast majority of research indicates that male sexuality is less fluid than female sexuality (Savin-Williams, Joyner, and Rieger, 2012).

1.9 Relevance to the Existential Approach

The topic can be seen to be very relevant to the existential-phenomenological approach, particularly due to its focus on shifting identities. Indeed, the existential-phenomenological approach itself is influential in challenging the view that people have essential selves or fixed identities (Milton, 2005). This is due to the approach emphasising the co-constructed nature of existence, stressing that we develop meaning and identity through being in the world with others (Milton, 2005). The view taken by this research, in line with that of the existential approach, is that identity is not a static phenomenon but is something that is constantly constructed in relation to others and to the world in general (Halperin, 2004). Among existential theorists, Sartre (1981) in particular is influential in stating that we have no fixed essence at the core of our nature, that we instead exist first and then create our sense of identity through our existence. Therefore, someone's identity is always subject to change throughout this process, improvised through our choices and actions (Murray, 2002). With relevance to this research project, the focus is on how a person's identity is 'constructed' and described within the changing social context of their relationship with a trans person.

These existential perspectives also tie in with psychological perspectives on identity formation and change that emphasise the socially constructed nature of identity

(Erikson, 1968; Marcia, 1980; Grotevant, 1987; Berzonsky, 1990; Kurtines, 1999 as cited in Schwartz, 2001). Identity formation is seen by some as the result of a dynamic interaction between the self and society which results in a person's identity being constantly subject to revision and reformulation (Erikson, 1968; Kurtines, 1999 as cited in Schwartz, 2001). While there may be an assumption that the majority of this process happens in adolescence, in reality it continues through the entire lifespan from infancy to old age (Marcia, 1980). This could be evidenced in the way that people continue to question various aspects of their lives and identity in their attempts to discover who they truly are and their purpose in the world (Schwartz, 2001). Dramatic crises are not required for day-to-day identity formation, which usually progresses in a mundane manner; however, cataclysmic and completely absorbing identity crises can occur at any point during our lifespan. Erikson (1980, as cited in Cherry, 2020) argued that the confrontation of these identity crises provides opportunities for turning points in identity formation. With reference to this thesis, a dramatic identity crisis could be triggered by a person finding out that their partner is trans, which could indeed act as a turning point for someone's identity.

Erickson (1980, as cited in Cherry, 2020) believed that if someone is successful in negotiating such a 'turning point', or more accurately a 'psychosocial stage', they will gain psychological strengths which will bolster their identity. However, if they are unsuccessful they will fail to develop them and move towards identity confusion. Therefore, at these crucial times the potential for growth is high, as is the potential for failure (Cherry, 2000). This could relate to the potential for growth that the partner of a trans person might experience when their partner comes out as trans to them, which could provide understanding about how this potential growth (or failure

to grow) might take different forms according to an individual's age or stage of life. The current research allows for an exploration of the positions that the participants may take towards the identity crises which might be triggered by their trans partner's disclosure and subsequent transition – for example, the extent to which they may be actively exploring their identities and the level of commitment they display towards their lives and relationships.

Furthermore, the topic of transgender can be said to make the fluidity of identity more explicit, emphasising the processes we all go through in negotiating our identities as human beings in the world. May (2002), for example, discusses how the notion of a 'real' fixed essential self is challenged by the fluidity of shifting transgender identities. We must all, for example, negotiate our position to sex, gender and sexuality and the particular meanings that this has in our given culture (Green, 2006, as cited in Meier et al. 2013). Although this is not unique to trans-people and their partners, they must negotiate these issues more overtly and potentially with more difficulty.

In a general context, our notions of sexual identity can be seen to be coming more into line with the existential perspective, with increasing evidence from both quantitative and qualitative research that our sexual identities are far more dependent upon constructivist variables that are influenced by a variety of psycho-social factors than inherent biological givens (Butler, 2006; Fine, 2010, as cited in Spinelli, 2014). As argued by Spinelli (2014), the sexual identity that people hold for given periods of time, which are believed to be simple, secure and satisfactory, can be revealed to be a mere sedimented way of being, and therefore open to constant re-assessment (Spinelli, 2014). Therefore, this could relate to the types of

relationships that we enter and the way we adapt our identity in relation to others in different contexts. For example, how a partner of a trans person might shift their identity in response to being in a relationship with a trans person, and how they make sense of this experience in the wider context of their life.

This attempt to 'make sense' of experience can be said to stem from the fundamental human need for meaning and our desire for life to be predictable (Tedeschl, et. al, 2009, as cited in Sommer, Baumeister & Stillman 2012). This is particularly significant when life events throw into question our beliefs about the world and the purpose of life, which can cause a reinterpretation of our life narrative and our view of self (Reker, Birren, & Svensson, 2009, as cited in Sommer, Baumeister & Stillman 2012). Such a life event could be when a trans person discloses to their partner that they are trans, and the past present and future of the relationship is reinterpreted. Indeed, this event can be seen to be one where a particular type of information/communication actually increases uncertainty as opposed to decreasing uncertainty, as is usually considered more typical. This is due to the potential for this information to be radically inconsistent with a person's established knowledge about their relationship (Planalp & Honeycutt, 1985). It is therefore meaningful from an existential perspective to see how people reinterpret their situation in the face of this existential uncertainty, and renegotiate their relationship.

1.10 Overview of the Research Project

The next chapter provides a review of the existing literature relevant to the topic, focusing on more contemporary research which has directly explored the cisgender partner's experience. Due to the inability to focus directly on male partners (due to the lack of literature on this) this will be across as wide a range of demographic groups as possible, to try to access general themes that may be relevant to all partners. Various themes are identified from the literature, including those related to the trans partner's sense of identity, the relationship issues that may be experienced and the wider social issues that partners highlight as significant.

Chapter 3 outlines my epistemological position, which leads onto the reasons why the particular methodology was chosen. It argues why the qualitative approach is the most suited to this research and why Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) as opposed to other research methods is the most appropriate. It then provides an account of the chosen method and how this will be employed, detailing the standard elements of the research design including the recruitment of participants and their characteristics as a sample group, procedure and method of data collection.

Chapter 4 presents the analysis of the data from the research interviews. This begins with an ideographical portrait of each participant. This will be to help give the reader a sense of each participant, and to provide an opportunity to include relevant idiosyncratic information about their experience, which would otherwise not be featured. After this, superordinate and subordinate themes discovered in the data will be described and interpreted.

In Chapter 5, the discussion, the findings of the study are taken into consideration. They are interpreted and their significance to the existing literature is described. This is to some extent comparing the study's findings from a male participant group to the literature which vastly focuses on the experience of female partners. Therefore, the differences which might be attributable to gender are theorised. At this point existential themes are brought in to contextualise the findings in relation to particular aspects of the human condition.

Chapter 6, the conclusion, summarises the purpose and overall findings of the study and its relevance to the literature of transgender partnerships and the trans gender field as a whole. It highlights the challenges that were experienced with the research process and the extent to which these were overcome. Any new insights gained as well as the limitation of the study's findings will be elaborated upon, explaining how these point towards directions for future research. Lastly, the conclusion will focus on how the research process has impacted upon myself as the researcher, for example how it influenced my view on the topic, and the way I interpret my own experience.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

2.1 Historical Overview and Introduction to the Literature

Historically research in the field of transsexualism and partnership has either tended to ignore the partner's qualitative experience of being in a trans relationship or portrayed partners in a negative light (McPhee-Simpson, 2009). Earlier work on partnership and trans individuals focused primarily on basic relationship variables. This included, for example, relationship status of the trans-people and the number of sexual partners they reported to have had (Junge and Pfafflin, 1992; Rakic, 1996; Nemoto, 1999; Lawrence, 2005, as cited in MCPhee-Simpson, 2009). These studies therefore failed to explore the general quality of the relationships that trans-people formed or to consider the partner's experience first-hand (McPhee-Simpson 2009).

Early studies which began to focus more on the actual experience of partners, tended to do this through a pathological lens by regarding this type of relationship as unhealthy (Meier et al. 2013). One of the best examples of this was Huxley, Kenna and Brandon (1981). The participants of this study were 35 partners of trans people, identified in a previous study involving 72 trans individuals. The study sought to build upon the previous study by accessing the partner's understanding of their trans partners' identity. The main finding of this study was that transsexualism is an overvalued idea which may be accepted or shared by a partner and the extent to which this idea is shared depends upon this level of emotional bond between the partners. Researchers such as Meier et al. (2013) have highlighted the bias present

in this research, specifically the assumption present, that a trans identity was an unhealthy identity and the belief that their partner was misguided in their engagement in this type of relationship. In particular, they saw the partner as sharing the “delusion” the trans person had of being a woman.

Since that time research has increasingly moved on to look at the qualitative experiences of partners of trans people, in an arguably less biased way. More recent studies have used grounded theory to generate theories to explain the social processes inherent in trans relationships or interpretative phenomenological analysis to give voice to this minority group (Pfeffer, 2008; Idso, 2009; Joslin-Roher, 2009; Brown, 2009; Brown, 2010; Forde, 2011; Platt & Bollard, 2018). This has included looking at a diverse range of partners and relationship types, involving partners and trans people of different genders and sexual orientations, at varying stages of the transition process.

This literature review features the themes present in more contemporary, academic and non-academic sources in the field of transgender partnerships, related to the non-transitioning partner’s experience. This review includes non-academic sources for two main reasons. Firstly, non-academic sources such as biographies and blogs provide rich, first-hand accounts of partners’ experiences, often providing an account of the changes in the relationship over time. Secondly, due to the lack of academic research in this area it was deemed necessary to use non-academic sources to supplement the review; these include blogs which have become a recognised source in many scientific studies. These sources were particularly important in order to include male partners’ perspectives due to this sample group being the focus of the

current study. However, due to a lack of published blogs on male partners' experiences, this review only draws from one writer. Only published blogs were drawn upon, due to the ethical concerns associated with using information from other forms of online blogs (chatrooms and the like) for example, whether or not such information can be considered to be in the public domain or if it is private (Hewson, et al. 2013). Although for the purposes of this review academic and non-academic sources are included together as qualitative data, it should be noted that non-academic sources such as blogs or biographies are less scientifically valid even though they are used frequently in scientific studies. Due to the lack of literature in this field the net has been cast wider, to include different types of trans partners, not just male partners. This is due to there being insufficient literature on male partners to write a full review. To make this explicit I have included a table specifying the participant groups featured in each study, so that these might be more efficiently referred to. This also helps to demonstrate the lack of research into male partners, as out of all of these studies only four participants were male, as included in the studies by Forde (2011), Chester, Lyons & Hopner (2017) and Platt and Bolland (2018).

Figure 1 Table of Research Focusing Directly on the Cisgender Partners Experience in a Trans Relationship

| Research | Sample group |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Alegria, C. A. (2010). Relationship challenges and relationship maintenance activities following disclosure of transsexualism | 17 MTF trans people, with cisgender female partners |
| Benson, K. Piercy, P. Bava, S. Fowler, B. L Hausman , Johnson, S.W. (2008) Gender Identity and the Family Story: A Critical Analysis | Seven self-identified transgender people and three of their partners (female non-transgender) |
| Bischof, G. H. Dhaliwal, H. K. Warnarr, B.L (2011). Wives who stay with husbands who transition, male to female. Michigan Family review. Vol 15, issue 1. | Wives of MTF trans people, currently married. |
| Brown, N. (2009). 'I'm in Transition Too': Sexual | 20 sexual-minority women, partnered with trans |

| | |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Identity Renegotiation in Sexual-Minority Women's Relationships with Transsexual Men. <i>International Journal of Sexual Health</i> , vol 21, Issue 1. | men, trans identity disclosed after relationship commenced, so relationship originally lesbian relation. |
| Brown, N. (2010). The Sexual Relationships of Sexual-Minority Women Partnered with Trans Men: A Qualitative Study. <i>Arch Sex Behav</i> (2010) 39, 561–572 | 20 sexual-minority women, partnered with trans men, trans identity disclosed after relationship commenced, so relationship originally lesbian relation. |
| Chester, K., Lyons, A. & Hopner, V. (2017). 'Part of me already knew': the experiences of partners of people going through a gender transition process | 4 cisgender women and one cisgender man. All current and former partners of people who had been through a gender transition. |
| Forde, A. (2011). Evolutionary Theory of Mate Selection and Partners of Trans People: A Qualitative Study Using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis. <i>The Qualitative Report Vol 16, No 5.</i> , 1407-1434 | 6 participants, non-trans people currently partnered with a trans person, either trans man or trans women, (one male participant). |
| Gurvich S. E. (1991). The transsexual husband: The wife's experience | 10 cisgender women, married to transgender men, who disclosed this to them afterwards. |
| Idso, E.L. (2009). A Phenomenological Exploration of Transgender Couples' Intimate Relationships During Transitioning, Implications for Therapists | 2 couples interviewed together, (1 cisgender woman and one trans woman). |
| Joslin-Roher, E., Wheeler, D. P. (2009). Partners in Transition: The Transition Experience of Lesbian, Bisexual, and Queer Identified Partners of Transgender Men. <i>Journal of Gay & Lesbian Social Services</i> , 21:1, 30-48 | 9 LBQ female or gender queer current or past partners of trans men. |
| Pfeffer, C. A (2008) Bodies in Relation: Bodies in Transition: Lesbian Partners of Trans Men and Body Image. <i>Journal of Lesbian Studies</i> , 12:4, 325-345 | 5 lesbian identified partners of trans men. |
| Platt, L.A., Bolland, K.S. (2018). Relationship Partners of Transgender Individuals: A Qualitative exploration | 21 participants of different genders and sexual orientations who were partnered with a transgender person. Including 2 male partners, one identifying as gay and one as queer. |
| Theron, L. & Collier, K. L. (2013). Experiences of female partners of masculine identifying trans persons. | 8 cisgender women, partnered, or previously partnered with FTM, in South Africa. |
| Tompkins, A. B. (2011). Intimate Allies: Identity, Community, and Everyday Activism Among Cisgender People with Trans Identified Partners | White, middle-class, cisgender woman partnered with FTM trans people. |

This review focuses on research conducted into trans relationships which survived the disclosure/transition process, and thus the experience of people who are currently partnered with trans people. The reason for this is that there is a lack of studies which explore relationship breakdown in trans relationships. However, there

is evidence of the pessimistic way that non-trans partners' can perceive the fate of their relationship after their partner's disclosure. For example, seeing their partner's gender issues as an impossible barrier to the survival of the relationship and their partner's disclosure as trans being the worst possible thing that could happen (Lev, 2003). Although one study by Meier et al. (2013) examines the relationship breakdown in trans relationships and found that a substantial number of relationships did end during or after transition (49%), this did not examine the qualitative experiences of the partners concerned. Therefore only the experiences of partners who are currently in trans relationships can be included in this review due to this gap in the literature.

2.2 Overview of Themes Present in the Literature

The themes that were identified seemed to naturally divide into three main areas. These were: issues of identity, relationship issues and social issues. To be more explicit, issues of identity included, among others, identity confusion or change and the different labels people use to describe themselves. Relationship issues included, amongst other things, the changing of the compatibility of partners after transition and transition-related phenomena becoming the central feature of the relationship, sometimes to its detriment. The social issues uncovered in the literature often related to the loss of community reference that a partner might feel, for example through no longer belonging to a particular minority community due to their partner's status and the mismatch between a person's internal sense of identity and how they are viewed by society. Although for the sake of clarity these themes will be discussed separately, there is an acknowledgment that it is hard to fully separate these themes

from each other, as they are so deeply interconnected. Therefore they have been separated into different sections but the points of convergence have been highlighted where particularly relevant.

2.3 Identity

2.3.1 Identity Confusion, Bereavement and Identity Exploration

The impact of a trans person disclosing their trans identity to a partner has been the main focus in several studies which emphasise the life-changing nature of this. A prevalent theme identified is the feelings of confusion that partners experience post-disclosure (Bischof et al. 2011; Gurvich 1991; Alegria 2010; Boyd 2007; Chester, Lyons & Hopner, 2017). This confusion could be related to their own identity being thrown into question and/or through them not comprehending the situation and transgender issues.

The impact of disclosure does not following a linear course; what tends to happen after the initial experience of confusion and bereavement is a personal exploration of the partner's own identity and various existential issues – for example, relating to meaningfulness, and loss (Bischof et al 2011; Forde 2011; Joslin-Roher & Wheeler, 2009). This is the case across a range of different combinations of trans relationships. In the majority of these studies participants' identities shifted in relation to their partner's trans identity. For example, in the study by Joslin-Roher & Wheeler (2009) eight out of the nine participants stated that the trans identity of their partner had facilitated them to explore their own identity. Similarly, but with straight

women partnered with MTF trans people, Bischof et al. (2011) found that in almost every case, the disclosure provoked a questioning of their own identity, as well as their ideas about the meaning of companionship, intimacy and love. This sense of loss seems to be different yet similar to the sense of loss a person might experience with the general ending of a relationship, as the relationship that they once knew is gone, yet they are still in a relationship with their partner and need to deal with all the issues that might arise through this. Therefore, this tends to suggest a more complicated grieving process. The following partner accounts help to reinforce this:

"Its been more than 3 years since my husband ceased to exist. I lost him not through the usual forms of losing a mate, death or divorce, but through his transition from male to female. Saying I've lost him is inaccurate though as we are still together but I no longer have a man. It was one of the most challenging and paradoxical experiences of my life. Learning to live with contradiction and the unknown is essential" (Fabian, 2015,: pg 263).

"I struggle living with the ghost of my husband, who is now a woman. I miss the hardness of a masculine hug, the feeling of protection and looking forward to seeing him dressed in a suit and tie, wearing great cologne. I am so thankful that I am not saying goodbye to you entirely but the parts of you that I have lost I will miss for the rest of my life" (Bloomfield, 2015: pg 111).

This type of grieving can be said to be related to "ambiguous loss". Ambiguous loss is a concept that was originated by Boss (2007 as cited in Godwin et. al 2014), which refers to the type of loss that is experienced when a person is physically present but psychological absent; therefore, due to the incompleteness of this loss, people cannot fully mourn the person and attach a label of grief to their experience. They

are, instead, caught between their desire to still connect with the person while mourning their lost relationship and their dreams and hopes for the future.

The concept of ambiguous loss is utilised in many areas of research, such as the experiences of the partners of people who have sustained traumatic brain injury (Godwin, 2014). In this instance, partners must adapt to their injured partner's condition and negotiate a way to move forward together and form a new couplehood, often with the uncertainty of not knowing if their love is a sustainable entity. This seems to have many parallels with the trans partner's experience. It could be said that the partners of trans people experience ambiguous loss; however, this is for the opposite reason due to the person they love being psychologically present but physically absent, and that they too must move through this to form a new couplehood. Another parallel that can be drawn is the experience of people partnered to individuals with acquired hearing loss. Similar to the partners of trans people, the hearing partner can feel a range of emotions that could usually be associated with the death of a loved one; however, they are not just mourning the loss of an individual but also the loss of a relationship and of a way of life.

Therefore, the challenge is finding a new way to connect with their partner and reconstitute their view of the future so that is more in line with their new reality (Hill, 2015).

There seems to be a common thread present that transition is not something that just happens to the trans person but that the partner themselves makes their own transition in response to their partner (Boyd, 2007; Canton, 2012 and Platt & Bolland, 2018). For example, this could involve the partner questioning their own sense of gender, femininity, masculinity and womanhood (Boyd 2007). During this time partners can feel conflict between wanting to support their partners and respecting

their own needs (Platt & Bolland, 2018). Indeed, the sense of identity confusion seemed to entail a need for a period of re-adjustment. For example, Boyd, (2007) describes being in a no man's land in terms of her identity, as she and her partner are no longer able to adhere to the category of heterosexual, yet not feeling homosexual either, with this being compounded by the lack of language that exists to describe her identity. This phenomenon is aptly illustrated by the following quote:

“Their identity may influence yours in ways you’ve never imagined, and suddenly you are perceived by the outside world at least as gay or straight, lesbian, or bisexual when those were never words you previously used to define yourself. Often it leaves us somewhere in the middle, wanting to both grow into this wonderful new way of being and still clinging to the identity we’ve always claimed” (Anderson-Marshall & Boyd, 2015: xiv).

To bring in a male perspective, with reference to a blog by Rozek (2016), a male partner of a trans woman (‘Experiencing a Parallel Transition from Inside the Closet’) which highlights the transition that partners experience and the tendency that they might have to minimise the significance of this in order to support their trans partner’s transition which is seen to be far more significant.

“Let me be clear that my partner’s transition is a tremendously significant one, I certainly don’t minimize that. Often, though, people in my position feel that focusing on our own transitions throughout this process is somehow selfish or unfair to our partners, whose transitions are far greater and more significant. We reduce ourselves to passengers and bystanders whose sole job it is to be pillars of support. I would argue that neither transition is greater or more

significant. They are different. They are incomparable. They are parallel”

(Rozek, 2016).

This quote seems to sum up very aptly the experience of many partners who may put their partner's needs before their own. This is an issue which is touched on throughout this review.

As mentioned previously the transition of the partner does not follow a linear trajectory and is a process which is hard to predict. Whereas a starting point may be identified (i.e. a partner disclosing their identity) the end point is far less clear. Again, this raises similarities to partners who are adapting to life with a partner who has changed due to having a severe injury, for example brain damage, as research by Godwin et al. (2014) has shown. The research highlights the disparity between clinician's predictions, partners' adaptation and the partner's actual experience. Whereas clinicians proposed the partners' adaptations would follow a model in which changes and adaptations gradually plateau, participants felt that this phase was never reached. This was due to brain injured people and their partners, still adapting and developing new coping mechanisms years after their initial injury. This seems similar to the trajectory of adaptation found in the partners of trans people, due to the process of transition being multi-faceted, and the impacts lasting far beyond it (Godwin et al., 2014).

2.3.2 Changes in Sexual identity

This process of adjusting to a trans person's disclosure (and subsequent transition) often leads partners to question their sexual identity. In many studies participants actually changed the sexual identity labels they used to describe themselves as a result of being in a trans partnership (Brown, 2009; Joslin-Roher & Wheeler, 2009

and Platt & Bolland, 2018). The results of these studies indicate a complex renegotiation of identity by a substantial number of participants. For example, in the study by Joslin-Roher & Wheeler (2009), the participants changed their identity from lesbian to queer, which meant that they were subscribing to a much less fixed identity category. This is a finding echoed by Forde (2009), who found that participants' sexual identities were related strongly to the gender identity of their partner. This is illustrated by the following quote from a female participant partnered with a trans woman: *"I always saw myself as straight before, then when P transitioned I saw myself as a reluctant lesbian, but now shifted as an accidental lesbian"* (interviewee one, line 39, Forde, 2011, pg.1414). This suggests that it is possible for sexual identity to change fluidly in the dynamic context of intimate relationships. It is important to note that the partner's renegotiating of sexual orientation may be more prevalent when the transition occurs after the relationship is established. Surprisingly the study by Platt & Bolland (2018) suggests that this can also be necessary for participants whose partners began to transition prior to the relationship beginning.

This re-negotiating of sexual identity is often confusing for the partner concerned, and has actual or perceived social implications. The following quote from a personal account of a 'straight' female partner of a transman aptly illustrates the inner dialogue that a partner in this situation may experience.

"Am I a lesbian because he was a woman? Am I pansexual? What is my number on the Kinsley scale? Am I straight cause he is a man? What the hell am I? As his girlfriend do I belong in his community? Am I an ally? Am I gay? If I tell my parents how his is, will they think I am a lesbian and will they

reject me? If I wear makeup and dresses, will they think I'm straight?"

(Espino, 2015, pg 38).

However, despite the confusion that partners can experience, in research by Platt & Bollard (2018) participants eventually felt positive about changing their sexual orientation labels to both include their transgender partners and more accurately label their own sexuality.

However, not all studies supported such a dramatic change in the participants' sexual identity. For example, in a study by Tompkins (2011) none of the participants in the study changed their sexual orientation as a result of their relationship with a trans man. The lesbian identified partners continued to identify as lesbians. However it is important not to assume that just because the partners did not change the labels they used to describe themselves that their sexual identity was unaffected, and that they did not question their identity in other ways, for example in relation to their gender identity. This is also something that has been reflected in the non-academic literature in partner accounts, for example in people's reluctance to define their sexual identity in relation to their partner. This quote is by a lesbian identifying woman partnered with a transman.

"My sexual identity is mine, it is my truth, frankly no box perfectly fits how I experience my sexuality. However lesbian is the term that most resonates with who I feel myself to be. This identity does not mean I cannot or am incapable of falling for a man and its legitimacy should not be tethered to this" (Coyne, 2015, : pg 236). This quote seems to show how a person's perspective of the sexual orientations/identity labels that they use may end up contradicting traditional understandings of what

these terms mean, (lesbian indicating non attraction to men). This in turn means that people can still identify with the label without being constrained by it.

2.3.3 Use of Queer to Describe Identity and the Benefits of This

For partners who wished to avoid rigid identity labels (as highlighted in the studies by Bischof et al., 2011 and Tompkins, 2011), a way for them to do this while still communicating their identity to others was to adopt the term queer. It is important to note that 'queer' is used in this context as a reclaimed concept to refer to a broader and deliberately ambiguous alternative to more specific LGBT identities (Oxford English Dictionary, 2014). In line with this definition, Forde (2011) highlights how participants often described sexual identity as falling outside the conventional parameters, with participants not identifying as homosexual, heterosexual or bisexual, but instead describing themselves as queer. This is something also found by Brown (2009) in women who had previously identified as lesbian exclusively who now identified as being on the queer spectrum. They dropped more rigid labels due to the increased fluidity that 'queer' allows them. Indeed, Brown's (2009) study saw this widespread adoption of queer as the main factor which allowed the participants to adapt to their partner's transition. Despite this, the high amount of investment in a lesbian identity that some participants had was a factor which hindered this process.

As well as the adoption of queer seeming to relate to better relationship outcomes, it is a term that appears to have other positive factors associated with it. For example, in the study by Tompkins (2011) participants commented on how the term queer helps give them a sense of community reference and belonging, "*Queer gives me common ground with gay men, trans women, high femmes etc that I may not seem*

to have much in common with (p17). This could be seen as important due to the loss of community reference that can occur when a person becomes part of a trans relationship, for example loss of a sense of belonging in LGBT spaces due to being seen as being in a heterosexual relationship (Theron & Collier, 2013; Brown 2009).

The blog by Ropella (2016) 'Am I losing my queer cred?' discusses the robustness of his queer identity within his trans relationship and the way his queer identity can be actually cultivated within this context. For example, through helping him enter a greyer space in terms of his identity (in line with how he defines queer) and gaining a greater sense of community reference in the queer community, and through activism about trans rights. This sense of robustness is illustrated by the following quote: *"I'm as queer as I allow myself to be. My queerness needn't be reflected in my relationship, because it's simply who I am. It doesn't matter how straight a relationship I'm in; my queer identity isn't something that can be erased"* (Ropella, 2016).

Indeed from various partner accounts from academic and non-academic sources the term queer seems to potentially fulfil various functions. Firstly, it can be a way for people to resist labels and to separate themselves from social conventions which they do not agree with, as illustrated in the following quote:

I consciously choose not to define myself with labels, as I observe how people are placed into identity categories that leave little room for flexibility, expansion or evolution. I want no part in the stifling oppression of titles that make other people feel comfortable" (De, 2015 pg 68).

This suggests that the use of queer, and its ability to help people transcend less expansive labels, can help people reach a more liberated state of being which can set them apart from others.

Secondly the term queer can be a way for a partner to more specifically resist defining their identity in relation to their partner's shifting identity:

"The great thing about being queer and really feeling it as the right identity for me is that no matter the gender sexuality or orientation of my partner, queer covers it, and I don't need to re-examine my attractions based on my partner" (Kattari, 2015, : pg 189).

This suggests that the use of queer can help a partner maintain stability and consistency of identity in the face of the continual change related to their partner's transition. This seems pertinent due to the literature suggesting that in this situation people may struggle to maintain a tether to their own identity.

Queer can also be used as a way to avoid invalidating the identity of a trans person, which the literature suggests is a major concern for partners. This is illustrated in the following quote by a previously gay identifying male partner of a trans woman:

"I'm open to you being a woman, I'm open to being in a relationship with a woman, you know, I'm so attracted to you and I still want to, you know, have sex with you, so I can't really rightfully think of myself as gay at that point, it seems to sort of invalidate her a little bit, and it also just seems inaccurate at that point. She has always been comfortable with me as being defined as

gay, she's never been offended or concerned by it, but I was, so I've sort of adopted more of a label as queer (Platt & Bollard, 2018, Mathew, 1261).

What seems particularly pertinent in this quote is that this concern of invalidation exists despite his trans partner appearing completely unconcerned about how he chooses to describe his identity. This, therefore, helps to suggest that this concern can stem from people's fears of potential invalidation and a preoccupation with accurately describing their identity and their relationship. It also seems that queer can be used by people as a default option when all others have been ruled out. This is suggested by the following quote in which a female partner describes her process of elimination of other sexual identity categories which left queer as the only viable option:

"Suddenly lesbian, a label that had felt good for me for at least a third of my life, no longer worked for me, because I clearly was attracted to more than just women. Straight hadn't worked for eons and decidedly would never work again. Bisexual felt too binary. Pansexual and or omnisexual technically worked by definition but just didn't resonate with me personally. That left me with queer" (Miracle, 2015, : pg 45).

Due to his suggesting that queer can be left as the only option available for some partners, this raises the question over how satisfied partners may be with being left with this term, as perhaps they adopt it in the absence of a better alternative.

Although queer can be said to be a more expansive, fluid sexual identity label than most other categories which currently exist, it still has the potential, like other labels, to be too reductive. This relates to the following quote by Valentine (2019): *"While every word we speak is a category, some have more power to explain who we are,*

and thus to limit, as much as enable the possibilities for our action in the world” (cited in Camminga, 2019, pg. 86). Indeed, due to the multitude of ways in which people can use the word queer, it would be pertinent for research to investigate this more thoroughly. This could include people’s reasons for adopting the term and their feelings related to this. These reasons are likely to be complex, and once known have the potential to be illuminating in regard to how they relate to an individual’s understanding of their own identity, their relationship and wider society.

2.3.4 Compromising Own Identity for a Trans Partner

Both academic and non-academic literature support the idea that the partners of trans people can often compromise or diminish their own identity as a way to support or bolster their partner’s identity, in their preferred gender. For example, in a study by Pfeffer (2008), which looked at previous lesbian identifying partners in relationships with trans men, many of the participants mentioned feeling the need to act and look more feminine to bolster their partner’s male identity in order to help him pass as male. Many of the participants found this hard to manage, as the more they bolstered their partner’s identity in this way, the more uncomfortable they grew at the perceived loss or invisibility of their lesbian identity. Similarly, when describing a relationship that was formally heterosexual with her husband, Boyd (2007) highlights the phenomenon of being viewed as lesbian by other people, if her partner passes as a woman, and feeling the need to actively create this impression in order to facilitate this. In a study by Theron & Collier (2013) which was conducted in South Africa this tendency to want to legitimise a trans partner’s gender role was also present. Nevertheless, this seemed more acutely tinged by specific cultural and

gender stereotypes. For example, to be a submissive and available typical African wife, with some of the participants feeling that it was necessary to replicate a very polarised gender binary, was not in keeping with their sense of their own identity. This was particularly the case for one participant, Busi, who elaborated upon her partner's desire for her to fulfil certain criteria related to her being the type of partner he wished her to be, displaying the feminine qualities which best reflect masculinity in their culture. This suggests the important variable that culture can play in the manifestation of this dynamic. The extent to which partners can lose or sacrifice their identity in relation to their partner is greatly represented in partner accounts in the literature. This can be to the extreme, as illustrated in this quote: *"You see in becoming a partner of a trans person my entire self was given over to you. My own identity makes no sense without you"* (Le Vie 2015, pg. 223).

This quote seems to suggest that due to the amount of investment that a partner may make in their relationship with their trans loved one, their own sense of identity may become contingent upon this. This seems to be a precarious situation to be in, in terms of how a person will feel if the relationship ends.

This sense of loss or sacrificing of identity which some partners experience is often tempered with the guilt that partners may feel about not being justified in their struggle, as illustrated by the following quote:

"At one point I remember saying, I just don't feel like I'm allowed to be me sometimes. Followed by the cold hard realisation of cisgender privilege slapping me across the face" (Bressette, 2015, pg. 103).

Partners can often disregard their own needs in favour of catering to their trans partner's needs due to feeling that they need to be completely supportive all the time, which can seem to become part of their identity. This is illustrated by the following quote from a male partner:

"I think that we are partners, especially if you're already partnered with the person when they start their transition or when they come out, you sort of put a lot pressure on yourself to just be the support and be the pillar that's going to, you know, help you through this and, we kind of just disregard ourselves, throughout a lot of it" (Pratt & Bolland, 2018, Mathew pg. 1259). In his blog Rozek (2016) comments on his experience of being a gay man in a relationship with a trans woman. This blog, 'Experiencing a Parallel Transition from Inside the Closet', includes a detailed account of him as an openly gay man now feeling like he had gone back into the closet again in terms of having to hide his identity as a partner of a trans woman. This led to him feeling conflicted, in terms of feeling driven to be the authentic, honest self he had grown used to being, with the desire to protect his partner, and the subterfuge and 'lying by omission' that this might involve. This helps to illustrate that a partner's identity may be compromised even when they are not deliberately attempting to bolster their partner's identity, but merely when they are trying to protect them.

Yet, in other ways, this initial compromising of identity may help people develop a more authentic identity by casting off personas, as illustrated by this partner's experience in her efforts to safeguard her partner:

"I was taught from a very young age to own a room when I walk into it, or someone else will own me, as a cisgender white woman, I've spent my life

being unapologetic about my aggressiveness and could afford to do so as the protected class. This brash demeanour served me well in a male dominated world and I was rewarded for it. I struggled with taking of the coat of protective aggressiveness, that I've been trained to wear throughout my life, my brusque façade was no longer humorous or helpful. Learning to let go of the combative persona I have perfected, involved a lot of grief, embarrassment and anger. When your partner's safety is at stake and not your ego, you let your ego die over and over again. Our relationship is a constant reminder of what it means to be seen authentically" (Bressette, 2015 pp. 105-106).

These quotes demonstrate some of the various ways and reasons that a partner of a trans person may lose or sacrifice their identity. It seems that due to the amount of emotional investment partners can make in their relationship and in their partner's transition there is potential for them to lose an aspect of their own identity through not deciding to invest in these. This may be at least partly due to the guilt that they can experience when prioritising themselves and their own needs as this does not fit well with the supportive altruistic role they have grown to identify with.

2.4 Relationship Issues

Many relationship issues can appear to result directly or indirectly from one partner disclosing that they are trans and the implications that this could lead to some type of gender transition. For example, transition related phenomena like caring for a

partner after surgery or dealing with the mental and physical effects of hormonal therapy, can become a central feature of the relationship and other relationship issues become less important by comparison. Partners may have to renegotiate their role in the partnership and how their identity complements their partner's, or partners may be concerned that their partner desires people of the opposite gender to them (Bischof et al., 2011). This can often put pressure on the relationship and cause the quality of it to suffer. For example, research by Bischof et al. (2011), which concerned wives' experiences of being with a husband who had come out as trans, spoke about the central position their partner's transitioning took in the relationship and the negative effect this had. The wives reported that they felt everything revolved around their husbands' emerging gender identity, leaving little room for the wives' range of emotions. This led them to feel that their needs were not being met, for example to feel desired and to be involved in transition-related decisions, which made the process more difficult for them. Related to this was the tendency for the trans person to want to rush ahead with their transition at a rate faster than the wife was ready to progress due to their excitement to finally pursue something that they had not been able to do before. This could often cause conflict as the wife would want to act as the brakes to slow down the transition in order for her to come to terms with this, and the trans person interpreting this as being counter to their aims (Bischof, et al., 2011).

2.4.1 Different Amounts of Sexual and Relational Compatibility due to Transition

The potential change in both partners' identities is likely to have a serious impact on their compatibility, which could result in them becoming either more or less

compatible as a couple on a sexual and emotional level. For example, physical changes to the trans person's body could entail new types of sexual experiences, as well as the body dysphoria of the trans partner complicating sexual intimacy. Both of these things can cause apprehension in the cisgender partner (Platt & Bolland, 2018). Some studies have looked at how intimacy and identity are renegotiated within relationships in which partners can be said to be less compatible than before due to their having conflicting sexual orientations. For example, Brown (2010) who looked at lesbians partnered with trans men whose relationships had previously been lesbian. This study highlights some of the difficulties that partners experienced when shifting their sexual orientations and identities during the course of their partner's transition. For example, one participant described her doubts regarding managing this process in the following way: *"There's a whole lot of grey area for where he may end up being comfortable with transition and a certain amount of grey area for my own sexuality and orientation, I'm just hoping that this is compatible"* (Brown, 2010, pg. 4). For this participant, as well as many of the others, her ability to maintain the relationship depended on her balancing connecting with her partner and supporting his identity without denying her own identity. As indicated by the quote this can mean occupying grey areas undefined in their parameters.

In the study by Forde (2011), which featured participants of different sexual orientations partnered with either male or female-identifying trans people, some participants reported the relationship was now seen as less compatible. This was due to conflicting sexual orientations now being present in the relationship, and a mismatch existing between the partners' inner sense of identity and the way that they were viewed by society, for example, one participant who still identified as lesbian but appeared to the world as a heterosexual woman due to being in a

relationship with a trans man. This participant described the conflict that she experienced between preserving her own lesbian identity and supporting her partner's male identity. It seems that in these situations people can either find ways of renegotiating their sexual intimacy, or change their view of the role of sex within their relationship. This was the case for participants in a study by Idso (2009) where sex was no longer considered a priority; instead, companionship and being together in ways that were non-sexual were given greater value.

However, it was not just conflicting sexual orientations that were implicated in terms of compatibility but the changing notions of gender and gender roles. For example, Boyd (2007) in particular described how the experience of her partner being trans has highlighted how her partner's experience of being a woman is different to her own. Boyd (2007) considers herself to be rather 'gender neutral' and describes herself as belonging to a particular subset of women who are, in her words, less feminine in terms of being uninterested in shoes, make-up, shopping etcetera. She identifies as a feminist who has never felt comfortable around such women, and expresses concerns that her husband will become one of those women that she does not like due to their interest in such stereotypically feminine things. While this can be seen as a rather stereotypical view of femininity, it seemed to be a legitimate concern for Boyd (2007). Therefore, how shifting gender presentations affect relationship compatibility could also be a general concern for partners. The change in the gender presentation of the trans person can cause a change in gender roles and the power dynamics in relationships, as highlighted in the study by Bischof et al (2011). This research illustrated that, in some cases, wives felt as if they had to take

on more stereotypical male roles and assume more traditional masculine duties around the home.

Nevertheless, it is important to not assume that transition will only cause areas of incompatibility. For example, in the study by Forde (2011) one partner expressed the idea that her partner's gender issues had provided them with some common ground. This was due to her having polycystic ovary syndrome and, thus, having certain masculine features associated with this. So, finding out that her partner also had gender issues, and masculine features, was described as an advantage. The phenomenon of a partner's changing perception of their gender identity, benefiting themselves and the relationship, is something that is reflected in non-academic personal accounts. This is illustrated in the following quotes, the first of which highlights how the partner was able to more freely express themselves without fear of judgement from the perspective of gender norms:

"In my dating past I often felt strange because my natural responses and self-expression were perceived as masculine, for instance embracing him from behind. Being myself in a two spirited relationship means I can freely express my emotional, physical and psychological self without worrying whether I am being too mannish"

(De, 2015,: pg 68). This second quote illustrates how a partner has made the most of embracing a more feminine identity to complement her partner:

"I loved being at the highest of high femmes with him. I was inspired. I went into overdrive of femininity, played every role, cooked, cleaned, and cared" (Pollard, 2015,: pg 96). These quotes seem to indicate that a trans partner's changing gender expression can act to facilitate a corresponding freedom of gender expression for a romantic partner. This may be in ways in which people could not have foreseen, and

concerning identities that they had previously repressed or been afraid to show. This seems to help support the idea that transition is powerful for both the trans person and their romantic partner.

2.5 Social Issues that a Trans Partner May Experience

There are various social issues that a partner of a trans person may experience, which could include: invasion of privacy, concerns over how other people will view them, the discrimination experienced by their partner as touched on in the previous section, and loss of community reference. These are very much interrelated with issues of identity, for example the concerns a partner may feel over how they are viewed by society is very much related to how the labels that other people bestow upon them might not relate to how they define themselves.

2.5.1 Concerns over how Society Views a Partner of a Trans Person/Invasion of Privacy

Due to the general interest that people have in transgender issues, it seems that when a person is a partner of a trans person it causes curiosity, which sometimes means people ask personal questions that would otherwise not be asked. A partner may perceive this as an invasion of privacy. The personal account by Emma Cantons (2012) "If You Really Love Me" discusses her experience of her husband coming out as trans after four years of marriage and touches on these issues. In particular one of the main issues was that she was concerned about how society would view her as a partner of a trans person rather than her spouse's change of

gender and whether or not she was still attracted to him. Emma had always considered herself a very private person, and it was therefore this invasion of privacy that most disturbed her about her partner's transition. This concern over the feeling of invasion of privacy, (being observed by society at large) is often accompanied by the partner feeling the need to explain themselves to others.

“For whatever reason I felt some kind of need to explain myself. I remember responding to people’s puzzled looks when they would hear your name, or I would talk about my boyfriend with the explanation that you were transitioning, but then I felt very uncomfortable with that. On one hand I struggled with being perceived as more straight than I already was and feeling compelled to explain myself. Yet on another I felt that outing you, besides from not being my business to do, undermined your identity as a man.” (Miracle, 2015, pg 45).

This quote seems to accurately capture the inherent conflict that may exist for a partner when they are caught between being true to their own identity and respecting their partner's needs. It seems that there is no easy solution to this dilemma and it is therefore a line that people may struggle to negotiate.

2.5.2 The Way that Society Views Partners of Trans People

Research indicates that there can be negative attitudes towards partners of trans people and that they can be labelled in ways that they find unfavourable. This seems in part to stem from the lack of available ways to specify attraction to trans people and those that are attracted to them. It seems that one of the main

contentious topics here is how to specify a general attraction (or open mindedness to dating/being in a relationship) to trans people without suggesting that this is a fetish (that a person deliberately seeks out trans people to fulfil some sexual need or desire). This 'fetishising of trans-ness' is known colloquially as 'tranny chasing' and those that do it 'tranny chasers', which is generally considered a negative term in trans communities; people are concerned about being seen as this particularly due to the suggestion that they have an ulterior motive for being with their partners. This is indicated in the study by Tompkins (2011).

This however leaves the problem of how to describe being erotically attracted to trans people. Trans amorous and transsensual have been suggested as alternative terms to indicate a preference for trans people without fetishising them.

Nevertheless, this may not fit if a person is attracted to a wide range of people including trans people. This led to the researcher's conclusion that there are no currently acceptable ways to discuss a desire for or an attraction to a trans person. Due to the idea that desiring trans people is taboo, this encouraged silence from partners in describing the nature of their sexual desire (Tompkins, 2011). Some accounts suggested that partners may attempt to find their own language but they doubt as to whether this is understood by society.

"Queer heterosexuality with kinks is way out on the front lines. No matter how ready we might be for it, the world isn't quite ready for us yet. Our new queer world is still too science fiction for most people" (Burkhart, 2015: pp 124-125). The use of the word science fiction in this quote suggests that the writer believes her relationship and her partner's identity are viewed as something almost alien by others. The world is not yet ready to understand it, and therefore there are limits to what one can do to be better understood.

However, while some partners may try to adapt existing labels or invent new ones, other partners reject the need to have labels to describe their attractions: *“The takeaway from all this was that labels are for other people. I love you and that’s all that matters to me”* (Miracle, 2015, pg 45). How others may become frustrated at the way society may misconstrue them is illustrated in the following partner’s experience:

“The world looks at my little family and sees a husband a wife and a son. They don’t see the challenge that we are to that patriarchal structure our society has bet everything on. They don’t see the subversion that we are. They think that we are hetero normative. And my husband likes it that way, but I don’t” (Harrington, 2015 pg 150).T

This last quote highlights the difficulty that a cisgender partner may have when the gaze of society appears to erase their identity and all the hard-won battles that were fought for it to be gained. It also highlights this heteronormative bias may differently affect the trans person and their partner, as while this is unpleasant for the cisgender partner it serves the trans person by helping to validate their identity. This helps to show another potential area of conflict that may arise between a trans person and their partner as a result of transition.

2.5.3 Discrimination and Protecting a Partner from This

Discrimination seems to be a common experience for trans people as well as their partners and some research suggests that partners may feel obliged to protect their partner from actual or perceived discrimination for example, research by Theron & Collier (2013) and Platt & Bolland (2018). In the latter study, this was expressed as a concern for 14 of the 21 participants, particularly as their trans partner was beginning

to express themselves more publicly. This was due to the trans person (and themselves by extension) being most visible as a member of a minority group (a trans person or a trans partner) and, therefore, most vulnerable to discrimination. It also could be said to be a concern for a partner as this is the point where the partner's transition is witnessed by others and therefore in a sense becomes real. Bischof et al. (2011) found that after the initial shock of their partner coming out to them, partners quickly began to worry about the discrimination they may experience, for example that violence may occur to their family, and that they may not be accepted by their family and friends. It can be said that this fear was justified, as research indicated that partners of trans people do not usually find their family of origin supportive (Riggs et al., 2015). Other research points to how this transgender related discrimination and other gender minority stress, such as financial hardship such as through loss of employment or high medical bills, can lower relationship quality in trans partnerships and result in poorer mental health for the couple (Gamarel et al., 2014).

It is perhaps because of the actual presence of 'trans relationship stigma' and other types of discrimination in trans relationships that partners may feel the need to pre-empt potential discrimination before it happens, for example in social situations. In research by Theron & Collier (2013) one participant talked about the responsibility to protect her partner from prejudices in social situations, which involved advanced planning and screening all possible events before arriving to try to pre-empt all possible scenarios. Research by Platt & Bolland (2018) also emphasises how partners may leap to the defence of their trans partners, particularly through correcting people's inaccurate usage of pronouns, and the anger and frustration they may feel when they consider their partner to be mistreated. This research highlights

how emotionally difficult it can be to see their loved one as the target of judgement, harassment or violence and it seemed to be this that spurred them to come to their partner's defence (Platt & Bolland, 2018).

“Why is this my job? I see with my heart that when he is mistaken for a woman he folds into himself, I feel a combination of anger and sadness. With a feeling of protectiveness I leap into action. I address the label as quickly as possible so that he can re-join me, so it doesn't ruin our evening” (Parens, 2015, pg 115).

To take on this role is obviously a very demanding task and comes with huge emotional burden. Its difficulty seems to come from the fact that it is a task that a partner may need to rise to at any given moment, in any situation, at a moment's notice, any time a person does anything to call their loved one's true identity into question. The enormity of this task is illustrated by the following quote from a partner's personal experience:

“Part of my spiritual contract with my love is finding ways to protect him without emasculating him. At my best I can try to hold up my superpower gauntlets and wave off the sharp knives of racist innuendos and the bitter tongues of hate. I can act as ambassador for the country of our relationship when soldiers advance” (Abrahams, 2015,; pp 77-78).

This last quote emphasises how much a partner may experience the act of shielding a trans person from the prejudices of society as a constant battle. A battle where soldiers are always threatening to advance and where the ground is valiantly defended against invaders. As in any war, there are casualties and it seems that, in this case, one of these could be the health and wellbeing of the cisgender partner if

they invest so much of their energy into protecting someone else at the expense of looking after themselves.

2.5.4 Isolation of Partners and loss of community reference

Feelings of isolation and loss of community reference are two interrelated themes that partners may feel. Partners may feel a sense of isolation due to their increased minority status as a partner of a trans person, having already been in a minority group and now become part of a smaller minority group. Due to this, they may not know anyone in a similar situation or be able to reach out to people who are.

Therefore, they may only have their partner as a source of information for trans issues, so may not receive a rounded perspective on these or people they can relate to (Theron & Collier 2013). This situation can be further exacerbated by limitations imposed by their partner and/or by their own concerns regarding outing their trans partner, as illustrated by the following quote:

“I really needed to talk to people in my immediate support system such as my parents and my best friends. I wasn’t able to do this however, until Ali (trans partner) gave me the go-ahead to reveal her feelings of gender dysphoria to them. By the time I was able to talk about these issues, I’d already been dealing with my own confusion, anxiety and apprehension for several months with only Ali for support” (Losh, 2015,: pg 155).

This helps to show how quickly and naturally a cisgender partner can become isolated as a side effect of their trans partner’s transition, and how, to some extent, they may feel at the mercy of their partner to obtain permission to share information that will allow them to connect with others. Indeed, partners, in their endeavour to support their trans partner and maintain their confidence, can silence the expression

of their own experience. As illustrated in the following quote, within a relationship it can be hard to determine what belongs to each partner and what is shared as part of the general relationship experience and, therefore, what is appropriate to share:

“We spoke frequently about where your story ended, where mine began and the parts we shared as ours. I aspired to honour your wishes and keep you out of harm’s way. I just wasn’t clear for myself that refusing to tell your story, not out you as trans, meant silencing my own. Unfortunately I still struggle with clearly finding that line” (North, 2015, : pp 158-159).

This quote highlights another area where partners must negotiate a difficult path – in this case in distinguishing between the aspects of the transition experience that are owned by the cisgender partner in comparison to the trans person. In other words, how much of the story is the cisgender partner’s to tell. The cisgender partner is on the journey with the trans person yet their communication about their experience of this journey is inhibited, presumably due to them not being the trans person themselves and therefore not the one who has the power to choose to divulge their partner’s secrets, yet this ‘secret’ completely affects their lives.

In addition to isolation from friends and family, some partners may lose or partly lose their sense of belonging to a sexual minority group that they once belonged too for example LGBT spaces if they are now seen by society as being in a heterosexual relationship. For example, in a study by Platt & Bolland (2018) a substantial number of participants (N=8) did not feel accepted by the LGBTQ community, and due to this did not feel that they had a place where they could express their experience, where it

would be validated. This is was illustrated by one of the participants in the following way:

“At pride events it gets weird and I feel awkward because we look like a really straight couple, I don’t want to hold hands because we have the hetero-privilege in that context. We joke that we are not straight enough for straight folks and not queer enough for queer folks”(Platt & Bolland, 2008,Erin1263)

This potential lack of belonging due to a partner’s transition is also reflected in partner accounts in the non-academic literature. This concern is perhaps best illustrated in the following quote:

“My own sense of sexuality, has always depended on having someone to act as a mirror and reflect me back to myself. My identity was mostly set by the people I dated. I felt that I didn’t really belong anywhere. And I worried about what the changes would mean for my new found comfort in gaydom. I thought I’d finally figured out who I was and was enjoying being recognized by others. He had given me a beautiful gift. Was he going to take it away again?”. (Goldberg, 2015, pg 146).

This quote helps to reinforce how a trans person’s transition can threaten a cisgender partner’s sense of identity due to the ramifications it can potentially have on various aspects of a person’s life. This seems to be particularly the case when the person concerned feels that their sexual minority identity has been ‘hard-won’.

Partners fearing the loss of an identity that they have strived to achieve was a phenomenon elucidated in the study by Brown (2009). This was illustrated by a participant who had struggled to be accepted as a lesbian in the LGBT community due to being “femme” (a lesbian whose appearance and behaviour are seen as

traditionally feminine), who now having fought for this identity felt it slipping away, due to her partner becoming increasingly male. In another study by Theron & Collier (2013) many lesbian participants of transmen identified the challenges of reintegrating themselves into lesbian communities. This was due to the perceptions of what it means to be a partner of a transman in these communities and the struggle to bear the tension that exists between trans and lesbian identities within them.

“As a femme I am frequently viewed as a straight woman in the mainstream world and my own queer community. While it doesn’t affect me as much as it used to, I still find femme invisibility frustrating to be constantly mistaken as the privileged hetero norm, rather than a member of my community. When we are at queer events and everyone avoids us like the plague because we are seen as the interlopers who don’t belong.” (Kattari, 2015, pg 193).

However, for other people it seems more possible to take advantage of the benefits that come with being viewed as a heterosexual couple.

“For a while I really enjoyed the heterosexual privilege that I had with Nick. It made me forget about all those years in the lesbian ghetto. When I was with him, I was free to be the most feminine balanced by his masculine energy. Should I be ashamed that after seventeen years of calling myself a lesbian that I liked being read as a straight couple?” (Pollard, 2015, : pg 98).

These two quotes help to illustrate the contrasting experiences that cisgender partners may have regarding their perspective on how society views them, and correspondingly, how this affects them emotionally and socially. They help to show how the experience is context dependant in terms of what benefits and

disadvantages a partner takes from the experience, as this depends on the partner's past experience, their current life situation and what their hopes are for the future.

2.6 Conclusion to Literature Review

The experience of a partner of trans person is complex involving many inter-related themes which cannot be discussed in complete isolation from each other. This is at least partly due to the partner's own adaption in response to their trans partner's disclosure (and/or subsequent transition) not following a linear course. While it has been highlighted that there are social and relational aspects to this process, the main aspect that has been focused on is the psychological, in terms of the impact on the identity of the non-transitioning partner. However, due to identity being such a complex multi-faceted phenomenon which is formed in relation to others it has many social, physical and spiritual aspects. Although there is insufficient literature on male partners to compare them to female partners, making reference to the few book chapters and blogs, which exist has been useful in highlighting some similarities. Understandably, it is likely that a male partner's perspective will be different to a female partner's. The following quote illustrates how isolating this might be for a male partner, who is in a sense a minority in a very small minority group.

“As helpful as their perspective is (female partners), many of the unique challenges they face are things that don't translate to my relationship. I've heard stories about helping their partners with things like makeup, hair, and clothing, or of catching their partners using their supplies to try things on their own. I can't relate there. I'm ultimately a man who has been with men for most

of his adult life” (Rozek, 2016: Experiencing a Parallel Transition from Inside the Closet).

This is not to say that other men will not feel more able to embrace and get involved with aspects of the process such as these, however, it does suggest some of the specific challenges that male partners may face. While these specific challenges cannot be currently elucidated due to lack of research, it is presumed due to the diversity of female partners’ experiences that male partners, as a group, also have a diverse range of experiences which research could bring to light. It is assumed that this will include both positive aspects and challenges.

Chapter 3: Research Methodology

3.1 Aims

The aim of this research was to explore and elaborate on the lived experience of male partners of trans people. This was explored in reference to prevalent themes that were found in the literature on trans partnerships and in light of classic existential concerns for example, identity, meaning, loss, and relatedness. This specific group was chosen due to it being considered a minority group within a minority group, as male partners seem even less visible in society than female partners and they are far less represented in research. Therefore, the main aim of the research is to give voice to this hidden minority population. Due to my personal experience of the topic I will use the 'first person' in the description of my planned methodology, as this emphasises the active role that I am taking as a researcher immersed within the research process.

3.2 Ontology

Ontology refers to the study of being, (Crotty, 1998). In terms of research this relates to what standpoint a researcher takes towards reality which will ultimately influence how they view the object of their study (Scotland, 2012). For example, is there one true reality that exists for everyone, or are there different realities perceived by different people at different times? This, therefore, raises the issues of objectivity and subjectivity and whether it is possible to have an unbiased view of any subject matter. With regard to this study I am of the opinion that it is not possible to

approach this topic from the ontological position of realism. This, in other words, means that I do not adhere to the point of view that the subject of study (trans partnership and identity change) has an existence independent from the person who is experiencing this phenomenon: the partners of trans people (Cohen, et al. 2007). Therefore, related to this, I do not believe that a researcher can discover a reality which exists independently from them (Pring, 2000). This is particularly the case due to my personal experience of the topic. Instead I believe that reality is constructed by each of us through our senses and perceptions and thus is inherently subjective. In terms of this research in particular no partner will experience their trans partner's transition in the same way and will differ in the meanings they create.

This research is influenced by Heidegger's' ontological understanding of reality, in its attempt to describe and grasp the unique qualities of human existence (Lavery, 2003). This refutes the idea that there is an objective reality that is easily observed by an independent viewer (or researcher) in an unbiased way. A particular phenomenon cannot be fully understood in this way, as any particular phenomenon, and more generally beings themselves, have a concealed component that can reveal itself in a distorted way, they therefore must be investigated within their own context. (Heidegger, 1962). According to Heidegger phenomenology provides the context in which this can be accessed, and it must be subjective and interpretative in nature to access proper meaning. Heidegger was interested in discovering some universal or ontological qualities of human existence. In a similar way this research examines the universalities of experience in the partners of trans people while acknowledging that every partner's ontic experience will be unique. In a more general perspective it focuses on the extent to which people may be influenced by the changes that their

romantic partner may undergo, and how they deal with a situation that they have not 'signed up to' in advance.

3.3 Epistemology

Whereas ontology refers to the study of being, epistemology refers to the study of knowledge, more specifically concerning the nature of knowledge and the forms that it can take (Cohen, et al., 2007). Therefore, a particular epistemology or 'theory' of knowledge will dictate how knowledge can be created, acquired and communicated (Guba and Lincoln, 1994). This, therefore, affects the relationship between the observed and observer or, in this case, researcher and participant. As the aim of every research project is to communicate its knowledge about a particular aspect of the world, it will communicate a set of assumptions about the world which are inherent in their epistemology.

As this research utilised phenomenology the epistemology is interpretative, as there is an attempt to understand phenomena through the meanings that people give them. This is due to the view that "the social world can only be understood from the standpoint of individuals who are participating in it" (Cohen et al. 2007, pg. 19). This means that this research is based upon my interpretation as researcher of the participants' interpretations or in other words a double hermeneutic, due to the fact that as the researcher I have been an active participant in the research and thus has taken an interpretative standpoint towards it. While a researcher can attempt to 'walk in the shoes' of the participants, they cannot experience their reality directly, and hence need to decode or interpret the meaning that participants give events and

situations (Smith & Osborn, 2008). As a result, there is no one distinct reality 'out there' to be observed or accessed. My epistemological position is interpretative through my adherence to this belief, further elaborated upon in the following quote: *"The perspective of the observer and the object of observation are inseparable; the nature of meaning is relative; phenomena are context-based; and the process of knowledge and understanding is social, inductive, hermeneutical, and qualitative"* (Sexton, 1997, pg 8).

I believe that this epistemological position suited my study, due to its aim being to give voice to an invisible group in society which has not been significantly studied academically before. The complicated nature of this research means that the lived experience of this group would have been unlikely to have been captured using any objective tools or preconceived structure. An interpretative stance allowed me to move beyond simple descriptions of the phenomenon in order for me to engage more fully in the 'meaning-making process', which paralleled the process the participants were undertaking. The reasons why an interpretivist stance was right for this study are illustrated by the following quote: *"Interpretive methodology is directed at understanding phenomena from an individual's perspective, investigating interaction among individuals as well as the historical and cultural contexts which people inhabit"* (Creswell, 2009, pg 8). This is due to this study accessing the individual perspectives of the partners of trans-people; and examining how their interactions with their trans partners have influenced them. In addition, it is pertinent to note that this was occurring in a cultural context in which trans issues have become more prevalent. An interpretative methodology was particularly good to use for a minority group that is rather invisible in society as it is "sensitive to individual

meanings that can become buried within broader generalizations” (Samdahl, 1999, pg 119).

3.4 Quantitative Versus Qualitative

The aim of this research was to explore and elaborate on the lived experience of partners of trans individuals; it did not involve suggesting any hypotheses or making predictions. Thus, qualitative research was considered the most appropriate research tradition for this project. Indeed, due to the under-researched nature of this topic, it was felt that such hypotheses and predictions could not be made. Instead, it was decided that the research should focus on giving voice to a population of people who have largely been ignored in the literature on transgenderism (McPhee-Simpson, 2009). Qualitative research can allow a rich engagement with subject matter and the elaboration of the complex themes and experiences which are expected to be found. This study naturally suited the qualitative approach due to it choosing to focus on the quality of the partners’ experience, as opposed to looking for causal relationships to explain aspects of that experience (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2012). Although it would be good to generate generalisable results for this population as a whole, which quantitative research could in theory provide, given the hidden nature of this minority population it was deemed unlikely that enough participants would be found to allow this. Therefore, instead, the objective of qualitative research was followed, namely to describe the experiences of the participants as fully as possible in their unique contexts (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2012).

3.5 Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

It was due to wishing to focus on the lived experience of a specific group in society that the phenomenological approach was chosen, as this is a particular strength of the approach (Langdrige, 2007). Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was used to take an idiosyncratic focus on the specific experiences of the participants (Smith & Osborn, 2008), particularly examining their relationships and social processes in the context in which they are occurring (Larkin & Thompson, 2011). This detailed exploration of the participants' experience was thought to be important due to the general lack of information on the relationship between a trans-person and his/her partner in the transgender literature field, and the suspicion that the information that does exist is largely misrepresented (Kins et al. 2008). Indeed, until fairly recently, studies that did touch on partnership mainly commented on the quantitative and demographic variables in trans relationships, ignoring more qualitative aspects (Huxley et al. 1981). IPA was also felt to be a good fit with the research topic due to how widely IPA has been utilised to explore topics related to sex and sexuality, and changes in identity associated with life transitions (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009), so therefore the main subject matter of this research. It can be said to be particularly suited to researching sex and sexuality due to its ability to challenge assumptions which construe or misrepresent people's experiences (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009). Therefore, something that has historically happened within this field. It can be said to be good at exploring the topic of identity as it can give the participant a good opportunity to form connections between the research topic and their sense of self (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009).

3.5.1 Limitations of IPA

However, despite the obvious advantages of IPA there are several limitations inherent in this approach which must be highlighted. For example, it has been argued that IPA does not give enough importance to the role of language in the construction of reality (Willig, 2008). This could be seen to be relevant to this study due to it concerning identity and therefore the language that people use to identify themselves. The literature has highlighted the extent to which people consider current language as inadequate to explain their identities to themselves and others. Nevertheless, it can be argued that IPA investigates meaning in the context of the narratives that people make about their lives, and is therefore always fundamentally intertwined with language (Smith, et al., 2008). For this reason, this study used the participants' own words and concepts whenever possible and investigated what they meant to them from their own perspectives – for example, labels such as 'queer' or 'pansexual'.

Another limitation of IPA is its dependence on both researcher and participant having advanced enough communication skills to fully elaborate on the phenomena investigated. This, therefore, necessitates the recruitment of eloquent participants who are ready and able to articulate their experiences (Willig, 2008). This is particularly the case when the topic area is especially complex (Tuffour, 2017). Due to the complexity of the topic of this research, this could have potentially been an issue. However, various measures were employed to try to limit the chances of this being an issue, such as the pre-participation phone call (see Procedure Section) and imposing a timeframe in the inclusion criteria (see Participants Section). This aided the recruitment of participants who were able to elaborate upon their experience.

Another limitation of IPA is that while its strength lies in understanding lived experiences, it fails to explain why these occur for example, through looking at the cultural or historical context that they have emerged from (Smith et al., 2009). However, while the research mainly focused on the lived experience of the participants and focused less on causality in terms of explaining why the phenomena occurred, it attempted to address the 'why' in other ways; for example, through accessing the meaning that participants gave to why the experience happened to them and how this was shaped by their cultural context. In order to access the participants' lived experience they were prompted to speak about this through using the Four Worlds Model (Binswanger, 1942, adapted by Deurzen-Smith (1988) as a frame of reference). This model is utilised among existential thinkers as a flexible way to conceive of people's relationship to the world in all its four spheres, specifically the physical, the psychological, the social and the spiritual. More specifically, it provides a framework to explore how people are confronting particular dilemmas or paradoxes within each of these areas (Van Deurzen & Kenward, 2005). Therefore, this is not a restrictive model that seeks to understand people by reducing them to types but instead attempts to provide a general map of human existence which focuses on the universality of human experience (Binswanger, 1963; Yalom, 1980; van Deurzen, 1984). Due to its flexibility and all-encompassing nature the Four Worlds Model was utilised to access a well-rounded account of the participant experience, and to further elaborate on certain phenomena. For example, the model helped facilitate an elaboration of the social dimension to more fully understand cultural context, and the psychological dimension to more fully access participants' coping strategies (see appendix 6 for an illustration of how this worked in practice).

3.6 Alternative Methodologies

3.6.1 Descriptive phenomenological analysis (DPA)

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was chosen as opposed to Descriptive Phenomenological Analysis (DPA) due to IPA assuming that it is not possible to transcend our own personal experience in order to objectively study any particular phenomenon. My approach was to follow Heidegger's assertion that this personal knowledge should be an intrinsic part of the research process (Dahlberg, Drew & Nystrom, 2008, as cited in Reiners, 2012). Due to my personal experience of the topic, this is thought to be particularly relevant.

3.6.2 Grounded Theory

Grounded theory as a methodology was also considered at an early stage of the research process. This was mainly due to the under-researched and undefined nature of the topic area which is a circumstance in which grounded theory could have been effectively utilised. This is due to grounded theory's focus on theory generation as opposed to the application of pre-existing theories (Tweed & Charmaz, 2011). The main goals of grounded theory were seen as consistent with the goals of this research, due to their focus on exploring the main issue that the participants are experiencing and how they are trying to resolve it (Kelle, 2005). Despite the reasons in favour of grounded theory, I decided to reject it as part of my

methodology in favour of IPA. This is because it veers from the traditional research process of a researcher first reviewing the literature on their chosen topic and then developing a research hypothesis based on this. Instead, the researcher should analyse the data they collect with no preconceived ideas or hypothesis (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). As I had direct personal experience of the topic, I did not consider this possible. I felt that it was important to immerse myself in the literature in the field before conducting the research in order to contrast this with my own experience and challenge my personal assumptions and bias.

3.6.3 Heuristic Inquiry

Due to the extent of my personal experience in relation to the topic, the heuristic approach was also considered as a potential research method at the preliminary stages in the research process. However, this approach was rejected in favour of IPA due to heuristic inquiry taking the experience of the researcher as the main focus of the research, in terms of how this experience influences the research and how the researcher is influenced by the research process (Hiles, 2013). Firstly, I did not think that this was appropriate, as my experience would have presumably differed too greatly from that of the participants due to my experience involving me knowingly entering into a relationship with a trans person. Secondly, I felt that this primary focus on my experience as the researcher would overshadow the experience of the participants, whom I wanted to be the main focus of the study. This is particularly the case due to the participants being a hidden and under-researched group in society who have not had yet had the opportunity to give voice to their unique experience. Another reason that I decided against heuristic inquiry as

a research methodology is its difficulties in setting clear boundaries in relation to duration and scope of the research project (Hiles, 2013). This is due to the doctorate research process being time-limited and having a set of specific procedures to be followed with accompanying deadlines.

3.6.4 Narrative Analysis

Narrative analysis was also a form of methodology that was considered at an early stage of the research process. This was due to its relevance to the theme of identity and relationships, such as the phenomena explored in this study, as it can be utilised to help people express their identity, relationships and emotions as revealed through the stories they tell (McLeod, 1997 as cited in, Priest, Roberts and Wood, 2002).

Narrative analysis could have also been considered suitable due to its ability to explore life-changing events that people experience and the way they give meaning to these in the context of the wider narrative of their lives (Priest, Roberts and Wood, 2002). This is because a trans partner's disclosure to a loved one could be seen as a life-changing event due to the impact that it could have on the life of the cisgender partner.

However, with further consideration it became apparent that narrative analysis was less appropriate than IPA. This was for several reasons. Firstly, its method of analysis did not seem to fit with the experience of the trans partners as portrayed in the literature. This was due to it analysing the data by organising the themes into subplots which are then integrated into a coherent story (Priest, Roberts and Wood 2002). What is meant by a coherent story is a narrative that has a beginning, middle

and end/coda (Riessman 1993, as cited in Priest, Roberts and Wood, 2002). A prevalent finding in the literature is that the non-trans partner's adaptation to a trans partner's transition is very complicated and does not follow a linear trajectory. For example, participants might be constantly readapting in response to new changes and challenges, in a process that may take many years. Therefore, it would be very difficult for myself as the researcher to organise their narratives into coherent stories. There is in a sense no coda to their narrative as they may still be trying to negotiate particular challenges, and the impact of the situation may not be realised until a point far in the future. I believe that the focus of narrative analysis, on situating a person's current situation in terms of the context of their chronological life (Fitzpatrick, 2017), is less existential than IPA. This is due to existential philosophy tending to argue that the past, present and future are interwoven into each other, hence they cannot be completely divided into separate components of an individual's life. IPA, on the other hand looks at how people perceive, organise and experience their daily lives, and the meaning they give to these experiences (Fitzpatrick, 2017). This will be unquestionably influenced by their perceptions of the past, present and future, but there was no attempt to impose a chronological structure upon this.

3.7 Validity

There has been much writing on the issue of validity in qualitative research, however, there is much confusion over this term due to the array of perspectives and multitude of terms used to describe it as a concept within qualitative research.

Despite this confusion there is a general consensus in the social science field that qualitative research needs to be able to show that their studies are credible

(Creswell, 2000). It is, therefore, due to this confusion over what the term means and this need to demonstrate credibility that a discussion on validity is warranted.

In simple terms validity in qualitative research can be distinguished by the type of lens that a researcher uses to look at the findings of the research. Whereas in quantitative research the validity will be assessed from the standpoint of test scores, instruments and experimental design, in qualitative research this would be from a standpoint informed by the views of the participants of the study. An example of this would be for the researcher to accurately judge when the data had become saturated enough to produce good themes and categories (Creswell, 2000).

However, there has historically been a lack of universally agreed criteria for helping to ensuring this kind of validity, or 'quality control', in qualitative research. Therefore, researchers such as Yardley (2000) have attempted to specify what components this could have. Yardley (2000) specifies four criteria that researchers can use to address validity, that many other academics (Langdrige, 2007; Smith et al. 2009; Shinebourne, 2011), agree are flexible enough to be highly compatible with qualitative research. The four criteria are: i) sensitivity to context; ii) commitment and rigour; iii) transparency and coherence; and iv) impact and importance. Each of these will now be explored in relation to the current study.

3.7.1 Sensitivity to Context

'Sensitivity to context' refers to how in touch the research is with the context in which the phenomenon under investigation is occurring, and how this sensitivity influences aspects of the research process. These include the epistemological position of the researcher, the research methodology chosen, the research setting as well as the

relationship dynamics between participants and researcher. This is of particular importance in qualitative research due to its focus on interpretation of the data. Therefore, for the researcher to accurately interpret the meaning of the data, they must be sensitive to the context that this is occurring in, as this will influence expectations and the dialogue of the participants (Yardley, 2000). As well as being sensitive to how to investigate the phenomena and encounter the participants and data, the researcher must also be sensitive to the context of the research topic itself by being familiar with all the relevant literature in their field of study.

This research project has done a variety of things to help ensure sensitivity to context, and this has been demonstrated in various ways. In the literature review I reviewed all relevant literature to sensitise myself to the topic and the way that it has been explored thus far. I used this awareness to influence the direction I took in my research, through becoming aware of gaps and through the prevalent themes in the literature informing my research questions. It has also helped me to become more aware of the needs of the participants, for example through becoming aware of what a diverse group of people they are and how they might be impacted differently by certain issues. In the methodology section I have explained my epistemological position and my reasons for choosing IPA by contrasting this with other possible methodologies. During the interviews that I conducted I maintained an awareness of the issues that a partner might experience (as informed by the literature and personal experience) while trying to be open to what the person said by avoiding making assumptions about their experience for example, the assumption they had found the experience profound and that it had changed certain aspects of their lives in certain ways. While I distinguished the differences between research and therapy at the outset, I kept in mind the potential for the research to be either cathartic or

disturbing for the participants, and how this might impact upon how they relayed their experiences. This was one of the reasons that I set up the study Facebook page as a source of support, as I could easily direct them to this forum where compiled and updated resources were readily available to them. This medium was also influenced by sensitivity to context, due to a lot of resources for partners being online.

3.7.2 Commitment and Rigour

Commitment and rigour are two qualities that are expected of qualitative research, to demonstrate thoroughness in all aspects of the research process. Commitment refers to the ability of the researcher to commit to a lengthy and intense engagement with the topic (Yardley, 2000). Rigour refers to the perceived thoroughness of the data collection and analysis that comes out of this intense immersive engagement with the research process. In terms of qualitative research it is important for the sample group chosen to provide all the necessary information for the research, not in terms of its size but in terms of its particular qualities. In terms of the analysis, it is pertinent that the researcher is able to display rigour in their interpretation of the data, an interpretation which should account adequately for the complexity of the phenomena observed, one that moves beyond simple common-sense understanding (Yardley, 2000).

This research demonstrates commitment and rigour in many ways, including in terms of the commitment I have demonstrated by my reflexivity, in that I can reflect upon my own personal experience of the topic. I have continually reflected on my own experience of the topic – a process which has, at times, been hard to endure, due to the painful feelings associated with it. I have confronted these issues directly in

personal therapy, for the purposes of self-development but also so that it would not impact upon this research in unknown ways. This has in turn increased the rigour of the study as it allows me to interpret the data freer from this bias. My commitment has also been demonstrated by keeping a research diary throughout the whole process, observing online communities constantly and, due to the niche nature of this research, travelling long distances for events related to trans partnerships for example a workshop in Cardiff on the topic. This has increased rigour, as it has allowed me to become more immersed in the topic in a more experiential way. This has allowed me to appreciate the idiosyncratic nature of the topic (how it manifests differently in different situations). This is something that I have brought to the analysis to avoid making assumptions when interpreting the data. I have, instead, been able to appreciate the idiographic nature of the data and apply a phenomenological attitude, analysing the transcript as a whole and then in terms of interrelated themes. This is something I have done in collaboration with my research supervisors as a way of increasing rigour. In terms of ensuring that the sample group provided all the required data, I made every effort to foster its homogeneity by carefully checking that all participants are screened to ensure that they fit the eligibility criteria, so that the same phenomena are explored in depth. This was through having an initially stricter inclusion criterion (gay male partners) and then broadening it when it became clear that it was too narrow to ensure adequate recruitment of participants.

This pilot study which was conducted prior to the main study can be seen as a way for the final research to have rigour. This is due to it providing a basis from which the future project could develop, not only in terms of the tutor feedback I received from the Research Project 1 Module (RP1) but also the feedback I obtained from my

colleagues, thus demonstrating my commitment to using the feedback of others in non-defensive ways.

3.7.3 Transparency and Coherence

These interrelated concepts refer to the research being presented in a way that is both clear and logical and, thus, having the power to convince readers of their merits. Transparency in the research process can be demonstrated by a researcher detailing every step of the process of data collection and analysis, and by quoting the actual words of the participants to support how the researcher identified certain themes. The anonymised transcripts of the interviews can also be made available to show the original source of the themes and concepts generated. It is crucial for researchers to be transparent in how their own assumptions, intentions or actions may affect the research. This is particularly significant if researchers have personal experience of the topic they are investigating (Yardley, 2000).

To help to ensure this I have firstly, included a verbatim transcript of one participant's interview in the appendix of the study, as well as examples of emergent themes from a multitude of participants. Secondly, in the analysis section I have included verbatim quotes from the transcript to illustrate every theme identified. This is useful in helping to illustrate why these themes were chosen, especially as they have been named using the participant's own words where possible. For the duration of the research process I have kept a research diary, to record of my own personal thoughts and feelings for example, the thoughts, ideas and feelings inspired by my observations of online communities for trans people and their partners.

3.7.4 Independent Audit

In addition to Yardley's four criteria, Smith et al. (2009) highlight the importance of independent auditing, which can be seen as providing a paper trail of the entire research process. This ensures that the researcher applies a disciplined approach to their work, which can be scrutinised by themselves or any third party (Yardley, 2000). For the duration of the research process I have kept a research diary, which means I have a precise record of the research process, in terms of the analytical steps I have taken. I have kept a detailed log of research supervision sessions, so that the impact of this can be demonstrated if required. I have kept all preliminary documentation from data analysis, for example annotated transcripts, with initial comments and speculative themes. I have also kept the mind maps I made to help organise the initial themes I compiled at earlier stages of the research process. This shows how the themes were seen to be interlinked, demonstrating how this changed at later points in time, such as when compared to subsequent interviews.

3.7.5 Reflexivity and the Research Process

While every researcher should endeavour to be reflexive this was particularly important due to my personal experience of the topic, as this created more potential for me to view the topic through a biased lens. Reflexivity refers to the constant process of reflecting on how my actions, values, perceptions, and the assumptions I

hold about the world, could have influenced the research (Lamber, Jomeen & McSherry, 2010). I therefore used reflexivity as a way to become more self-aware to prevent my own knowledge from distorting the data in unknown ways (McGhee, 2007, as cited in Lamber, Jomeen & McSherry, 2010). I also used it as a methodological tool to situate myself within the data, to allow the data to be explored in terms of how my own experience relates to the topic in a wider context (Braun & Clark, 2013). I believe that led me to become more creative within the research process, and richer data were generated as a result.

I kept a research journal to encourage reflexivity and limit bias, which is something I did from the initial stages of the research process. I chose this method as memo and journal keeping have been suggested as effective ways of maintaining reflexivity (McGee 2007, as cited in Lamber, Jomeen & McSherry 2010). As suggested by Braun and Clark (2013), this journal included reflections on various specific aspects of the research process: 1. The thoughts and opinions which arose from my observations of trans online communities; 2. The process and practice of recruitment and data collection; 3. My personal observations about the participants during interviews, and my personal experience of each interview; 4. Analytical insights that occurred during data collection; 5. The emotions that I experienced throughout the research process, and how these in turn may be affecting the research; and 6. Lastly, and perhaps most importantly, how the research process appeared to be affecting the participants.

The journal, as also suggested by Etherington (2004), focused more generally on my own position to the research topic for example, by exploring the following: 1. The reasons why I was drawn to the topic and my own personal history; 2. My assumptions about the knowledge I was encountering in the trans field and how I am

positioned in relation to this; and 3. How my perspective is influenced by my personal demographic characteristics for instance by my gender, social class, culture, and/or ethnicity.

As well as keeping this journal for my own process of reflexivity, I have also included where relevant my personal reflections from this within the actual thesis – for example, when these obviously compare or contrast with the participants' experiences. My own reflexive accounts were added to the thesis in order to adhere to the belief by Ortlipp (2008) that it is beneficial for a researcher to acknowledge and make visible, within the research, their experiences, opinions and thoughts, as this creates transparency in the research process. There is a concern that it is not possible for the researcher to completely control their values through this method or by bracketing their assumptions and although steps were taken to minimise the impact of my own experiences on the research, reflexive comments have been added to the discussion and the conclusion in order to create transparency in the process (Ortlipp, 2008).

3.8 Ethical Considerations

It is thought that the study has the potential to raise various ethical concerns, particularly due to the possible vulnerability of the participants. This is particularly due to the disclosure of a trans identity being seen as a form of bereavement to a partner or loved one, with researchers such as Bischof et al. (2011) viewing the partners of trans people as going through a process of grief, similar to that identified by Kubler-Ross (1996). This helps to highlight the emotional turmoil that can be experienced post-disclosure. This led to the decision of putting a time frame on

selecting participants with regard to how recently this disclosure occurred. This was to limit the possibility that participants were too emotionally vulnerable to give truly informed consent, or to deal with issues that may arise out of their participation. However, using the literature on trans partnerships as a guide revealed no specific answer as to what such a time frame should be. This is due to most research involving partners who are with trans people at various stages of the transition process, and no specific information is given with regard to when exactly the initial disclosure occurred. Also, as transition is a multifaceted process with many different components, partners may find different parts of this process more difficult than others. So, it would be hard to tell when any given individual is likely to be most emotionally vulnerable.

Therefore, in an attempt to fit a rationale for imposing a particular time frame on potential participants, I turned to bereavement research as this was in line with the idea that initial disclosure can be experienced as a type of bereavement. This was in regard to the ethical issue of how long after a bereavement occurs a participant is deemed suitable to engage in bereavement research. Again, however, there is no clear-cut answer, as there is no consensus between researchers in this field as to how soon it is appropriate to approach bereaved people (Stroebe et al. 2003).

Instead of proposing a specific time frame, bereaved people's ability to give rational informed consent is seen to depend more on the context in which the study is conducted and their individual psychological state (Cook, 2001). This suggested the need to take a case by case approach when selecting suitable participants for this study. However, it was also decided that applying a minimum time frame would help to screen out particularly vulnerable participants. Through discussion with my research supervisors, a decision was made that this would be one year post-

disclosure, as it is felt that this would allow the participants some time to come to terms with the revelation while allowing the experience to still be fresh enough for it to be richly explored. Participants could have had the opportunity to have explored their experience in personal therapy, sought the support of specialist agencies, or talked to friends and family. This is, however, a purely arbitrary time frame for the reasons detailed.

As part of the research procedure, to allow for a case by case approach to be employed, potential participants were phoned/Skype called prior to their proposed time of participation. A time for this was arranged beforehand, after they responded to the research advert. This was to check that they met the criteria of the study, and to elicit information about their emotional state and the support networks that were available to them. If people had seemed to be in a heightened emotional state or had few or no support networks, they would not have been interviewed and included in the study. However, this was not a situation which occurred. A phone/Skype call was considered a good method of communication for this purpose, as it gave rich information about the participant's current psychological state through, for example, their tone of voice. Immediately after their participation, participants were encouraged to contact me via email, if they had any questions that arose as a result of their participation or if they wanted to find out more information about the progress of the research. They were also directed to the study's Facebook page and reminded that this would be continuously updated with information about the study and links to support material and resources.

The method of recruiting participants also posed some ethical dilemmas due to the reliance on the use of online communities. At an earlier stage in the research process I had planned to recruit directly from online communities which I had become a member of. I had planned to become a member as this would allow me to view communities and their members in an openly identified way. Without actually joining a particular online community, it is not possible to enter the space to find out information about it and its members. This is particularly relevant due to the recommendations proposed by Wesolowski (2014) in his discussions on using online forums for recruiting study participants. This is that a researcher should spend a considerable amount of time, prior to recruitment, observing users' interactions and conversations. This is to gain information about many aspects of the community's life. For example, the relevance of the members' conversations/posts to the research question, the activity level of members, and usage statistics such as the total number of members and how many are active at any given time. For this reason, it is first recommended that the researcher join as a member of the community, registering an account, then discussing the feasibility of the study with the site administrators. However, this presented too many ethical issues with regards to me occupying a dual role of both community member and researcher. This particularly relates to issues concerning social responsibility, and the potentially disruptive effects that research could have on the online community in question. For example, members of a community may consider their online space to be private, and consider the presence of a researcher as unwelcome and invasive. This, in theory, could lead to people feeling they have less freedom of expression (Hewson et al. 2013). Although my intention was not to include any of the information posted by community members on online forums, blogs or message boards directly in the

research without community members' knowledge, this still has ethical implications as community members may have feared that this was my intent. This is particularly important due to current ethical concerns with 'lurking'. This refers to researchers observing online conversations in chatrooms and listservs as they are happening, without the users' knowledge (Brownlaw & O'Dell 2002). There is increasing evidence that this is damaging to online communities (Eysenbach & Till, 2001). Therefore, while I would not be in fact lurking, community members may respond to me as if I were, which would affect their interactions within the community and their feelings of security within it. However due to the potential advantages to the researcher that come with online community membership, as detailed by Wesolowski (2014), I still joined some online communities as a member. However, these were communities which I did not use as a recruitment tool. This avoided the issue of dual roles, while still allowing me to access useful background information about the topic.

3.9 Method

3.9.1 Research Design

Before beginning the recruitment process I collected background information by observing online trans communities for a period of around six months. I did this due to the valuable insights that these communities provided me with regard to current issues that trans people and their partners faced. Online communities can be a way for a researcher to “enter into the hidden worlds of sensitive topics and social taboos” (Strommel & Koule, 2010, as cited in Wesolowski, 2014, pg 9). It is also argued that online communities can provide the diversity of experiences and narratives required for qualitative research (Kim & Jin, 2006, as cited in Wesolowski, 2014). Therefore, this encouraged me to use online communities in this research. The online content of users was not used directly in the actual research thesis; however, it was used to inform my research journal, the literature review, and the topics I chose to investigate with the participants. In order to observe these communities I had to join as a member. To avoid issues with joint roles, I did not use the communities I joined to advertise my study in. I became a member of two international communities. The first of these, ‘Susan's Place’ (<https://www.susans.org>), is a transgender resource website with accompanying forums and chat rooms for transgender people, their family, friends and significant others. The second, ‘Laura's Playground’ (<http://www.lauras-playground.com/aboutus.htm>), is an international community that holds separate weekly support groups for trans people, their partners, friends and family.

Semi-structured interviews were used to gather data from the participants. The aim in these interviews was to create an interactive dialogue between researcher and participant. A discussion guide (see appendix 6) formulated prior to the interviews commencing helped to ensure consistency between interviewees while it also allowed enough flexibility for them to be adapted to suit the individual participants (Langdridge, 2007, as cited in Forde, 2011). I designed these questions with reference to the literature in order to explore the participants' lived experience as a partner or previous partner of a trans-person. This meant that there was a particular focus on themes such as: the partner's sexual or general identity and how this changed during the course of the relationship; participants' perceptions of how other people view them as a partner of a trans person; how the partner's outlook on life may have been affected as a result of their relationship; and issues related to the partner's wellbeing. The prompts that were used to support the discussion guide, to encourage more depth, were based on the Four Worlds Model (Binswanger, 1942, adapted by Deurzen-Smith 1988) This is due to the model's prevalence in the existential field and due to its ability to give a 'rounded' exploration of phenomena from the perspective of a person's lived world, drawing attention to that which has not been made explicit (see appendix 6 which illustrates how this model informed the interview schedule). The data obtained (see Data Analysis section) will be analysed using IPA (Smith, 2003).

Following on from the aims of IPA all questions were as value-free and open as possible. This was to try to and elicit from the participants detailed accounts of their experience in their own terms. Although it was initially hoped that interviews would be able to be conducted in person or face to face to increase the richness of the data

and to allow greater opportunity for building rapport this was largely not possible due to the difficulties in recruiting participants who were close enough geographically. In general the method of advertising the study (online, and utilising facebook) increased the likelihood that participants would be sourced from areas geographically distant from the researcher. This therefore, entailed the use of Skype for interviewing. While face to face interviewing has obvious advantages, it can be argued that programs such as Skype mimic face-to-face interactions, presenting people accurately as they appear in life, almost to the same degree as face-to-face exchanges (Sullivan, 2012). This mode of interaction seemed in some ways to suit the participants who were used to online communication through their participation in online forums, and many of whom had privacy concerns. Therefore, face to face interviewing would have excluded many potential participants from participating.

3.9.2 Participants

The study included nine participants. This was felt to be a good number due to IPA generating a very rich amounts of data which have to be analysed in detail. The aim was to generate enough data from the collective group of participants to develop themes that could be comparable across cases, without generating too much data that people's individual experiences could not be elaborated upon fully (Smith and Osborn, 2008).

Exclusion criteria were applied, in that the participants must have not entered their relationship knowing that their partner was trans which necessitated a situation

where their partner had to disclose their trans identity to them at some point after the relationship had begun. For the purposes of the study, this must have been at least six months after the relationship had begun. The participants must have received the disclosure of their partner's trans identity at least one year prior to their participation in the study. This was for ethical reasons to try to increase the likelihood that the participants had adequately come to terms with their circumstances, before their participation. Another exclusion criterion was that participants who were not currently in a trans relationship must have been in a previous trans-relationship less than three years ago. This was so that this experience was deemed fresh enough for it to be richly explored. A further exclusion criterion was applied to participants who had mental health conditions that appeared severe enough to impact on their daily functioning and general wellbeing. This is due to the increased risk that participation may pose to them. A pre-participation phone call was used to gauge each potential participant's emotional and psychological wellbeing, as well as their potential sources of support, and this criterion did not need to be enforced in any case.

It was initially planned during the recruitment phase that the participants would all be gay male partners of male-to-female pre-operation trans individuals, who initially began these relationships as same sex relationships. This was to give the study a very specific target group due to the tendency for sampling in IPA to be purposive and homogeneous. This meant that the participants should ideally share a common experience to be investigated but not to vary too much on demographic characteristics (Langdrige, 2007) in this case gender, sexual orientation and partnership type. This specific sample group was also chosen due to it being the

most similar to my own experience. However, it was also acknowledged at the outset that the recruitment of such as a specific sample group might be problematic due to the lack of visibility of male partners. Therefore, I was open to the idea that the inclusion criteria may need to be expanded to aid recruitment. During the recruitment process it became increasingly apparent that this sample group was indeed too specific to allow enough participants to be found who met the study criteria. This was due to the rarity of male partners, particularly those who identify as gay. To quote a research participant who acted as a senior mentor for an online community for partners: *"I have to admit that in all the time I have been interacting with other trans partners, that gay men partnered with transitioning folks is the rarest bird"* (David: 55). It also became increasingly apparent to me the extent to which sexuality is fluid. This was highlighted by the personal accounts in the literature of the partners of trans people when they were elaborating upon their sexual identity, many of whom rejected specific sexual identity labels. It therefore did not seem appropriate to require participants to identify with rigid labels as a requirement for their participation.

The participants were recruited through a Facebook webpage specifically created for this study. This acted as a way to advertise the study and as a way for me to communicate transparently with potential participants. Due to the concern that this method of recruitment alone may not generate enough participants through people directly contacting me through it, I decided to post a link to my webpage on various online communities which exist to support trans people, their family, friends and significant others. I contacted the moderators of the communities to ask them to post information about the study and links to my webpage on their site. Forde (2011)

similarly reasoned that an online community was a practical way to recruit participants. This is due to this being a potentially rather invisible group in society, as off-line support groups in some areas of the country are non-existent and potential participants may be geographically spread out, so it is argued that online communities can provide a robust means for researchers to recruit participants from for qualitative studies. This is particularly true when the phenomena under investigation are specific to a minority population who are experiencing unique personal circumstances (Wesolowski, 2014). Out of the communities that I utilised, the ones that generated significant leads were the Reddit group 'My partner is trans' (<https://www.reddit.com/r/mypartneristrans/>) and 'Trans Pulse' (<https://www.transgenderpulse.com/forums/>). Although international, these online communities seemed to have a predominantly American membership. While I did contact UK-based communities such as the 'Beaumont Society' (<https://www.beaumontsociety.org.uk/>) and other Facebook-based support groups for partners with the aim of increasing the likelihood of gaining a homogenous sample, this was not fruitful. This was either due to being informed upon inquiry that these groups had no male members, or through the partner forums being largely inactive. This method of recruitment resulted in some participants contacting me directed through visiting my Facebook page, and others through seeing a link to this on an online community.

3.9.3 Inquiry and Research Questions

The aim of the study was to explore the changes in identity experienced by partners of trans people as a result of participating in a trans relationship. Although identity

can be thought of as a mainly psychological phenomenon, this thesis takes a broader perspective on identity, seeing it as a multi-faceted phenomenon that has physical, social and spiritual aspects, or in other words is connected to all four dimensions of experience. For example, it could entail body image on the physical domain, or how identity is constructed through our relationships with others on the social domain. Three specific questions were focused on. These questions were picked strictly due to their relationship to prevalent themes in the literature and because they reflected classic existential themes, such as meaning-making/meaninglessness, death, isolation/relatedness and freedom, or in other words the 'ultimate concerns' of life that all people must confront (Yalom, 1980). These concepts informed the research questions by focusing them on how the individual adapts to the unexpected situation that they find themselves in with their partner, from an existential perspective. This was achieved by asking questions which explore the changing nature of their relationship with their partner, their changing relationship with themselves, their changing relationship with society and how they find meaning throughout this process, for example through the new identities they form. This relates to the existential themes of 'meaning-making' and 'interrelatedness' as well as relating to 'death', as with the embracing of new identities comes the death of previous identity and all that rested upon this. This is eloquently expressed by Spinelli (2015): "every moment of change connects us to our death anxiety. Of course, each potential 'death' also provides the possibility of a 'resurrection' – a new way of reflectively experiencing relational being – as expressed via the emergence of new relationships, dreams, directions and hopes" (p. 12). The questions asked also related to freedom: the freedom that the participants may discover they have to embrace new identities and change in certain

ways they did not expect. It was decided that three questions would be an appropriate number to adequately capture the complexity of the phenomenon while keeping it at a level which is manageable for a doctorate thesis. These informed the interview schedule used in the research process.

The study, therefore, has three research questions in relation to these themes.

These include:

RQ1: Does the partner's identity transition in response to their trans-partner and if it does, what perceived impacts does this have?

RQ2: Do the transition related issues of the trans person affect the relationship and the wellbeing of the partner?

RQ3: Does the participant's internal sense of identity relate to how they perceive society's view of them, and how are any potential discrepancies negotiated?

It can be seen how these questions relate to the Four Worlds Model (Binswanger, 1942, adapted by Deurzen-Smith, 1988) in terms of them being applicable to the physical, the psychological, the social and the spiritual dimensions of a person's experience. For example, the questions explore the psychological dimension through looking at identity and wellbeing, and the social dimension through looking at the person's relationship to their partner and wider society. Individual questions on the 'interview guide' and the prompts that accompanied these delved into the

physical and spiritual aspects of this process – for example, though seeking to explore the changing nature of physical intimacy or the particular meanings that people formed about their experience.

However due to IPA being open to hearing what the participants have to say, and to opening up new areas to add to the existing literature, I did not stick strictly to topics related to these questions. Additional questions were asked within the context of the dialogue of the interview to open up the range of possible responses for example, by asking participants if there is anything else not covered that they would like to say. So, while I was informed by the literature, I also followed the participants in the direction they wished to take. This, in turn, helped me to bracket my personal experience and limit my bias.

3.9.4 Procedure

After the participant indicated their interest in participating, a consent form and a participant information sheet were emailed to them which they were asked to complete and return before the agreed interview time. A time for a pre-participation phone call was also arranged at this point. This was to help ensure that people met the inclusion criteria, and to help screen out participants who were not eligible. After this the research interview was arranged. Due to Skype interviews being employed it was necessary to adapt the procedure to accommodate this. For example, an agreement was established between myself and each participant that no one should

enter the room at their respective locations while the interview was taking place. This is due to the increased risk that Skype potentially brings of the physical venue in which the researcher and participants are interacting not being private (Vassiliou, A. NSPC website).

Before beginning the actual discussion plan, participants were asked whether they had any questions, and were reminded again that they could withdraw from the research process at any point to further ensure informed consent. I then asked each question, waiting for the participant to fully stop responding to each before going on to the next one. The interview times ranged between 58 and 80 minutes in length.

After their participation, participants were debriefed. This included giving them a Middlesex University debriefing form, thanking them for their time and offering them means of support should they need it post-interview. Post-participation support included the offer of a follow-up phone call, at an arranged time, a few days after the interview, and giving participants a prepared information pack of potential sources of support. The study's Facebook page also doubled as a supportive forum for partners containing links of relevance to them.

3.9.5 Data Analysis

IPA was used to analyse the interview transcripts (Smith, 2003). Prior to the thematic analysis, I firstly formatted all the transcripts in an identical way, with each line numbered and with an extended right margin for notes. This was to ensure consistency and ease of documenting emerging themes. For ease of identification

each transcript was colour coded. Apart from this, the transcripts were not changed in any way and provided the raw data to be analysed.

Each transcript was analysed individually and read several times before being analysed. Initial analysis involved reading each transcript line by line and writing comments in pencil. On subsequent readings I developed these comments into basic themes that seemed to best capture what was being expressed in the data. During further readings I gradually developed these initial themes into clusters of increasing sophistication until sub-ordinate themes were formed (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2012). However, during this process I continued to return to the data to avoid the themes becoming too removed from their original source (Langdridge, 2011).

As far as possible, as suggested by Hefferon and Gil-Rodriguez (2011), I bracketed my own assumptions from my personal experience, so as to avoid approaching the data from a biased standpoint, and let each participant's data suggest the themes. The research journal was particularly useful at this time as its usage allowed me to become aware of my opinions and assumptions and therefore made them easier to separate from the analysis. An example of such an assumption was that trans relationships were inherently more challenging than non-trans relationships, which was highlighted to me as an assumption when I became aware of my level of surprise at the amount of positive aspects of the participants' experiences represented in the data.

Once all the transcripts were analysed, the commonalities and differences between the participants' experiences were apparent in the links between the themes across

the transcripts. This information is presented in a final themes table, which amalgamates the data obtained from all participants (see Findings section).

Chapter 4: Findings

4.1 Introduction to the Findings Chapter

This chapter begins by presenting a first person idiosyncratic account of all Nine participants. This was included due to the very context specific nature of participant experience, and the acknowledgement that every trans partners' experience is unique, as well as helping the reader to quickly appreciate this uniqueness. Upon analysing the transcripts a significant amount of the material from participants' accounts was considered to be idiosyncratic, yet illuminative in providing context for the participant's experience. As Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis can be carried out both thematically and idiosyncratically (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009, p.109), it was felt to be both appropriate and important to include this useful information in the results section. As IPA is interested in what interpretation a particular person is forming in relation to what is happening to them (Smith, Flowers, Larkin & 2009), these portraits can provide the reader with a snapshot of this process of meaning making.

Following this, each of the main themes that emerged from the transcripts are described and analysed along with their subthemes. These will be 'brought to life' by the inclusion of the most relevant verbatim extracts from transcripts, to enrich and validate the findings. As suggested by Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2009) these will be extracts that seem to most reflect the core of the participants' experiences, or those that seem particularly significant to the individual who said them, due to the emotion or tensions they convey. However, also in keeping with IPA, atypical

extracts will be included to illustrate contradiction and the complexity of the subject matter (Smith, Flowers & Larkin 2009). It is hoped that this will limit the chances of the research leading to the development of overgeneralisations and assumptions about the cisgender partner's experience.

While each theme is presented as distinct, it is important to note that there is a great degree of overlapping between themes. However, this degree of overlapping of themes can be said to relate to the way multiple domains of life can be simultaneously affected for the partner of a trans person. As far as possible the themes have been presented in the order that they were elaborated upon by the participants during the interviews, and this is therefore thought to represent a rough outline of their journey, after their partner's disclosure. However, it is not entirely possible to present the themes in chronological order, as while adapting to a partner's transition may involve certain general stages, it is not a linear process. The earlier themes begin by representing the more idiosyncratic aspects of individual participants' experiences with later themes representing the more universal aspects shared between participants. While this was not intentional but was merely how the themes naturally emerged it can be seen as illustrating the way partners may change their focus through the transition process. For example, at first feeling alone and different from everyone, and then later finding union with other people with similar experiences, which helps them to appreciate the universalities of the experience. This seems in a sense similar to the way that IPA moves from the particular to the shared when examining people's experiences (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009). It was deemed appropriate at times to take a more idiographic focus to do justice to the individual experiences of the participants, particularly if certain aspects of this experience seemed particularly salient to them. Taking an idiographic focus can, as

argued by Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2009), help provide a “nuanced analysis of particular instances of lived experience” (pg 37), which can make a significant contribution to both the particular topic of study as well as to psychology in general (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2009).

It is important to note that the themes relate to how the participant views their experience at one particular moment in time (at time of interview) which could have been very different at another time, for example, at a different point in their partner’s transition process, or after an argument with a partner. Therefore, due to this as well as the uniqueness of trans partners’ experiences, these themes cannot be generalised to all partners of trans people. Rather they provide possible accounts of what may feel significant to partners at certain points in time. The themes do not attempt cover every aspect of the participants’ experiences, as the complexity of this, this would render it impossible. Instead they were selected due to their prevalence in the transcripts, the weight which they seemed to be given by the participants in their descriptions, and the relevance they had to the research questions. The nature of themes generated was undoubtedly influenced by the use of the Four Worlds Model (Binswanger, 1942, adapted by Deurzen-Smith, 1988), as this helped to structure the research questions and the interview guide. For example, focusing on the psychological dimension enabled the participants to explore their ways of coping, which resulted in this aspect of their experience being elaborated on in their accounts; as a result, ways of coping was a theme that emerged from the data. Similarly, a focus on the social dimension influenced the data to contain themes on culture. However, while this model influenced the data in terms of the themes that were present, it did not influence the analysis of the data and the generation of

themes themselves. The analysis was carried out without reference to any models or theories so that it could be kept true to the data.

Figure 2 Table of Information about Participants and their Relationships

| Name* | Age | Location | Sexual identity | Length of relationship | Stage of transition of partner | Gender identity of partner | Disclosed |
|--------|-----|----------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------|--------------|
| Jacob | 33 | Michigan, USA | Gay before, now queer | 6 years | Fully transitioned, including gender-affirming surgery | Female | 4 years ago |
| Sam | 32 | UK | Gay before, now not quite gay | 6 (on and off), ended 18 months ago. | Change of pronoun, came out to friends and family, however choose not to pursue transition | Female | 3 years ago |
| David | 73 | Virginia USA | Straight | 40 years | Fully transitioned into male gender | Trans man/male | 12 years ago |
| Eric | 18 | California USA | Bisexual, straight before? | 2 years | Change of dress, pronouns, about to start HRT, wants full transition | Trans man, male | 1 year |
| Philip | 24 | California, USA | Bisexual before, now considering pansexual, due to attraction to non-binary people | 2 years | Started T, no surgery | Trans man, non-binary | 13 months |
| Murray | 25 | New York, USA | Mostly straight | 10 (married 6 years) | 3 months HRT, top surgery | Trans man, mostly gay | 3 years |
| Keith | 29 | Washington D.C., USA | Queer | 5 years | Social transition, hormone therapy, awaiting top surgery | Masculine identifying trans person Use 'they' pronoun | 1 year ago |
| Simon | 40 | Utah, USA | Gay | 3 years | Social transition, | Trans woman | 15 months |

| | | | | | | | |
|------|----|---------------------------------------|----------|---------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------|---------|
| | | | | | hormone therapy | | |
| Tony | 30 | Raised in Kansas, now California, USA | Bisexual | 7 years (married 5) | Top surgery, hormones, considered himself fully transitioned (not bottom surgery) | Trans man | 6 years |

*All Names have been anonymised by use of pseudonyms

While the table helps to illustrate the diversity of the participants and their relationships, many of the similarities that the participants shared on a demographic level are still to be specified for example, race, religion and education level. All the participants were white and therefore it could be said that they had the benefit of a certain level of privilege due to this. As a result of this, the experience of discrimination may be something that is less familiar to them or was less familiar to them before their partner transitioned. While participants' religious and spiritual beliefs varied, none stated that religion was particularly important to them, although Eric mentioned utilising aspects of Buddhism as a means to cope with the rapid changes in his partner's transition. All participants were well educated, articulate, and were competent in using online platforms. While this undoubtedly helped to ascertain the participants' experiences, it is useful to point out that the findings may have been different if a different sampling method had been employed and, thus, a different demographic had been recruited.

It can be seen from the table in figure 2 that the American participants came from several different states. It is important to note that it is likely that in America there will be greater variation in someone's experience according to where they live (the particular state), compared to the United Kingdom for example, with issues such as

discrimination. For instance, this could be a result of laws against discrimination on the grounds of sexual or gender minority status, which vary greatly from state to state. Although on a federal level the Supreme Court has legalised many LGBT rights, these are not implemented in many states; in fact only 20 states have banned discrimination on these grounds, and in the remaining states sexual or gender minority people are not protected from discrimination in many spheres, such as employment, education and housing (McGarrity, 2014). There is great variation with regard to this in the states where the participants live. Using the Human Rights Campaign website (<https://www.hrc.org/>), which indexes each state's anti-discrimination laws as a reference, comparisons can be drawn. States can have legislation to protect people against ten possible types of discrimination, including hate crime, conversion therapy, school bullying, employment and trans health care provision. Whereas states such as California, New York and the District of Columbia have legislation in place to protect people from all ten types/areas of discrimination, other states that participants came from do not have all these protections. For example, Michigan (which seemed to offer the least amount of protection provision) fails to enact laws against discrimination in eight of these areas, including for hate crimes, conversation therapy and discrimination at work, which can all take place without legal recourse; there is also no official legislation for the provision of trans health care. Virginia, Utah and Kansas (among other shortcomings) did not have official legislation in place regarding trans health care, which means that insurance exclusions for transgender healthcare can happen and it is not obligatory for trans people to receive trans-inclusive employee health benefits. This is something that could make a huge difference to a trans person's life as well as that of their partner. While the presence of anti-discrimination legislation and actual discrimination

experienced do not exactly mirror one another, it is a good indicator of the different ideologies present and of what is deemed acceptable by common consensus. It also might affect the participants' fear of potential discrimination as, if discrimination happens, they will be less protected.

4.2 Being the Participants

While there were aspects of universality in the participants' experience of being a partner of a trans person, in that they all experienced phenomena such as shifts in general outlook, changes in their relationship to their own gender and some re-negotiation of identity, the way that the participants experience this was often idiosyncratic, and the idiosyncratic accounts help to contextualise their experience. As the aim of interpretative phenomenological analysis is to explore how participants are making sense of their personal and social world (Smith and Osborn, 2008) it is hoped that these accounts will provide the reader with an inside perspective into their world, in a quick and powerful way.

Each participant account will now be given in the form of a short verbatim extract. These were chosen as moments in the interview where participants seemed to best encapsulate their experience.

4.2.1 Being Jacob

"I'm a fairly liberal outspoken guy about LGBT issues, and I was yes you know, great (regarding trans people) but it was still laced with the idea that I would never date someone that was trans because I feel like there is so much baggage that goes

along with it. Before she came out to me that was kind of my default position, oh well they are great (trans people) for other people (to date). Which is terrible but after that (when he found that his partner was trans) it changed when it became something that was theoretical or an idea or other people and instead became my life and who I was with that changed. So it's definitely opened me up to people and more open to alternative view points and ideas and just philosophies about people's identities in general... I could have with firm confidence say oh no, I could never be with someone who is trans. I would think "oh that's a woman" I'm a gay man. A hundred percent I'm very confident on that. That all goes to pieces when it's real life and you actually love somebody".

4.2.2 Being Sam

"When he disclosed that he was trans, I just kind of accepted it cause either it didn't seem important, or because I had waited so long for this relationship that I thought that it would be stupid to give up on it now. It felt like it was the start of something exciting, but really it was just the beginning of the difficulties, of having my happiness depend so much on someone else and their fickleness. I mean about whether he was going to go ahead with the transition process, and how this was intertwined with whether we would stay together or not. It was a dark time and sometimes I felt so desperate to hold on to this thing that felt so fragile and so conditional. And now I wonder how I managed to last for as long as I did in this place of uncertainty, following someone else's lead, always a step behind. But there was a time that I felt that I really could do it, love a woman, have sex with a woman, and I hadn't found a way of doing that before. I think that I came from the perspective that love should conquer all, and that love would not ideally be about gender. I suppose I always

wanted to believe that, and I suppose this was my opportunity to prove it was true and I did feel that my love was strong enough. But now it's more about why should I pick the difficult road, such a difficult path, why should so deliberately make life harder for myself".

4.2.3 Being David

"I've always thought of gender as being fairly flexible, being a continuum rather than a category, that kind of thing, so for me it just wasn't very difficult to subscribe to this slightly different version of who I have always been. This 'odd ball' kind of person. And if I do feel alone or isolated it's because of being that, not because I'm a male partner of a trans person that and that makes me suddenly feel different to everyone else, I've always felt like that anyway. I don't think that it has been a big deal for me personally, it's just one more thing in life, just one more test. It's not different if somebody, let's say you are a husband and a wife and the wife gets breast cancer and has to have a mastectomy, so are you going to say now, well I've got to have kids or I can't love you anymore, you go past these things, there are things that are more important, far more important. To me it's all about love and not about plumbing. But it is a big deal to other people, in society, particularly now and all of a sudden people are thinking it's okay to be violent towards trans people and it becomes scary, I feel like we have to be on guard all the time. It's becoming the new normal".

3.24 Being Eric

“I have to deal a lot with the fear of change because it’s kinda scary, you’re kinda used to one person, and changes are soon to come, I have to deal with a lot of internalised homophobia and internalised transphobia. There’s a lot of issues that I’ve been working away at to try and get over and understand. Making it less difficult on myself but I’ve been making some decent progress, steady progress on getting over it. You know I’m not going to lie, it’s been pretty difficult, it’s like I’m continuously trying to make myself ready for the next step in whatever comes. And I feel that those changes are probably a lot sharper for me personally, because of the way that I was raised because of being raised in a homophobic, transphobic family, so I have a lot of deeply rooted fears and issues but they are unravelling the more time I spend with him, the more he helps me. I have a lot better understanding realisation of people’s emotions and positions in volatile situations, I also feel like I have much better understanding of how love in relationships work. I feel like I have been blind the whole time. But know that the blindfold is off”.

4.2.5 Being Philip

“I was raised very conservative, very black and white, it was very much girls are this way, guys are that way and due to my relationship and being exposed to people who don’t fit that stereotypical mould of what a girl is or a guy is. I feel that by dating someone who is trans and heavily involved with LGBTQ+ community, you also start to realise that there are non-binary people. I feel that was very beneficial for me as I don’t feel obliged to be that toxic masculinity kind of thing and allowed me to not

perpetuate that stereotype on others, realising that it doesn't have to be that way and whether you are seeing it with your friends, with who you're dating, I feel that it changed my worldview. Personally I love getting away from it, it's very nice not to be the feelingless, strong man that you picture when you think of a stereotypical guy and it's very freeing for me personally. I think I've always been very much of a very expressive guy and I think that there is something very freeing to realise that I don't have to hide that, I don't have to wear bland clothing, I don't have to bland and buff and everything else that is commonly associated with being a man".

4.2.6 Being Murray

"I feel like I'm mostly in it for the comfort of skin to skin contact, the feeling of being wanted, the "blowing off steam" aspect, and the fact that I genuinely do care for this person and want him to feel fulfilled... but there is still this feeling that the gears just aren't meeting. We both have fun; we -connect- on some level. I just struggle to get my body, mind and heart all on the same page. It feels like having an affair with your best friend who you know is a bad match, but is willing to fool around whenever you are. Part of me wonders "What if it could work after all?" Part of me wonders if he is using sex to hold us together even though he knows we are moving apart regardless. Part of me wonders if we could keep the marriage together and find secondary partners to close the remaining gaps in our sex lives. Ultimately, I know the answer here is to stop doing it until I know what I want and he knows what he wants. But when we both want each other, at least in that moment, it seems right enough".

4.2.7 Being Keith

“If you were to ask me describe your perfect person, I would just describe my (trans) partner. At the time (when they came out) I was like ‘how fucking sick is it that I’m with my perfect person but can’t be together, like literally everything in our lives have been so great, all my dreams have come true and then this happens. “I’m straight but I’m not going to be in a straight relationship, what does that mean? Trying to figure out if I want this, cause it would be morally wrong for me to run from what I truly want, out of fear, right. But then more and more I began to realise that I was finally acknowledging an attraction to trans and intersex people, that had always been there but deeply repressed, and that I was not as straight as I thought. It’s funny the way the world works, right, my partner comes out and it’s not me convincing myself that I’m queer, it’s like oh wow, I was queer. I am queer, right and I always have been this way and it’s just funny how it works. If I hadn’t met my partner and they hadn’t came out, I wouldn’t have had this weight lifted off my chest and been open about myself and experienced the love and compassion that I’ve experienced from other people. I’ve always been very interested in the human experience, and I guess this is now part of my human experience, it’s very important to me that I’m getting closer to being the person I’m meant to be despite my flaws, and I feel like I’m definitely getting closer to being that person because I have been able to accept myself”.

4.2.8 Being Simon

“When my partner told me and the initial shock wore off, I tried to compartmentalise my feelings. But every time I tried to talk to a friend about what had transpired I would break down crying and feeling this overwhelming sense of loss. It felt as if the future we had been planning just went up in smoke and things would never be the same. I worried that this new aspect of his life would push me out. There would be no room for a gay boyfriend (husband) to a trans woman. After much discussion and many tears, my partner and I came to realise we were both afraid of the same thing, losing each other. So we continued planning our wedding and our future with me supporting him all the way. But with me still having this little nagging voice in the back of my head saying “his feelings could change once he starts transitioning. So I was caught between this worry and my desire to make this transition as comfortable as possible but I don’t know what to do or say. I felt a little left out because I want to be there for him every step of the way. But I had to come to the realisation some parts of this journey he has to take alone”.

4.2.9 Being Tony

“I have become more aware that the masculine stuff that I put on is a façade. That it’s something I put in the morning to go to work, and it’s not something that I feel really comfortable with entirely, and as I’ve become more aware of that (...) for me I kind of see it as a burden. I’m a blue pill kinda guy, you can keep the red pill, I can continue to live in the matrix, happy and hunky dory and never know that it is a matrix. I’ll be fine just leave me in there, looks kinda rough from the outside, but I’ll keep the blue pill. Kendell’s transition made me more aware of my relationship to my own gender and how to tinker how I presented my gender and that made me more

aware of how privilege is tied closely to how I present. And I must just live on the knife's edge constantly cause if I shift it a little bit this way it's rocks off tremendously and if I shift it just a little bit this way it ramps up tremendously (the experience of male privilege). It's almost like an S curve, it's almost like my natural presentation must be right on the inflection point. (...) It's been really validating for me. I've known for a really long time that I was bi, since I was 18 or 19 but even when you say it... Bi-erasure, is a real thing in the United States. Bi people don't exist, you don't see them, people are either gay or straight. There is no in-between and I definitely hate that. People have always, from when I was a small child, mocked me or made fun of me for being gay but at the same time also insist that I'm straight. And that's pretty fucking messed up. That was definitely my reality for a long time. Having Kendell out has been really validating for me as being both bi and not straight. (..) And we came out together in a way, and everyone who knew us should have known. Like this shouldn't have been a surprise to anyone, but we weren't out to ourselves let alone the rest of the world, so we weren't out when we met, and we came out together".

Figure 3 Table of Themes and Subthemes

| Theme | Sub-themes |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1: Context specific Loss/Sense of Bereavement | 1: Loss of a previous way of life 2: Loss of Previous Identity and All This Entails 3: The provoking of existential issues, related to fear of change or loss |
| 2: Making Sense | 1: The Mystery Solved 2: Adapting to the News 3: Making Sense of Sex and Intimacy 4: What is the role of a trans partner 5: How much is it about transition and being trans |
| Theme 3: Finding a way to cope | 1: Reducing anxiety/embracing anxiety uncertainty 2: Normalising/minimising 3: Seeking Connection |
| Theme 4: Seeing through a broader lens | 1: Broader concept of gender 2: Broader view of relationships and Romance 3: Broadening perspective on self and sexual Identity |
| Theme 5: Renegotiating sexual identity or discovering attractions that were repressed | 1 Discovering what was already there 2: Renegotiating Identity or changing view of sexuality in general |
| Theme 6: Embracing the benefits | 1: Increases insight/self-development 2: Feeling liberated 3: Benefits to relationships |
| Theme 7: Cultural Influence | 1: Potential discrimination 2: 2: Culture as Catalyst |

4.3 Theme 1: Context Specific Sense of Loss

The first theme presented is the context specific sense of loss that the participants experienced, which seemed unique to their situation as a partner of a trans person.

This theme is presented first due to this often being one of the first experiences that a partner goes through post disclosure, however it is important to remember that during the ongoing process of transition a partner can experience bereavement at any point. This theme attempts to capture all the different losses that were considered significant for the participants. These losses were often due to the participant's relationship with a trans person causing certain changes in their lives that were not easily reversible and thus provoking a process of bereavement. However, the specific nature of the loss that the participants experienced depended on their individual circumstances, as the possible things which could be lost were dependent on the nature of their personal identity, lives and relationships. This is explained throughout this theme and the subthemes. Sometimes participants did not explicitly label something that they were experiencing as grief, but this was inferred from their responses.

4.3.1 Subtheme 1 Loss of a Previous Way of Life

This subtheme relates to the participant experiencing a loss of not just a previous way of life with their partner as they once knew them, but also their plans and goals for the future. Participants elaborated upon a complex grieving process, for while mourning the loss of their partner and how they once knew them, they were simultaneously adapting to a new life with the same person as they continue to change. This often seemed to evoke complex feelings, for example guilt and cognitive dissonance, enmeshed with grief. This is perhaps best illustrated by Murray.

“I feel so much guilt about missing some parts of our relationship. (...) My partner is very relaxed about his past, to him it seems like a stepping stone, a journey to finding who he truly is. Which I think is where my guilt stems from. Although he says it's okay for me to still think of him as female in the past (...) When I start to think about our past too much, I find myself accidentally referring to him by his old name and pronouns. So that is my struggle. Not knowing if I have to completely rewrite our past in my mind or hope that this cognitive dissonance gets easier with time”
(Murray:186).

It seems that this guilt stems from his need to grieve for his and his partner's shared history, a need that his trans partner does not want to share. For this participant there does not seem to be an obvious way to work through this. This seems to be at least in part due to the fact that we cannot completely disconnect the past from the present and the future due to these being so fundamentally connected.

Though every partner seemed to experience some aspect of this loss, there was great variation in the intensity that it was experienced. Even though the length of time that someone was in a relationship prior to their partner's disclosure might have thought to be a reliable indicator, this also was rather context dependent.

Participants who seemed to experience the least sense of loss of a previous way of life were the partners who had been in the relationships the shortest amount of time, before their partner's disclosure, namely Eric and Philip. Conversely this was also not a significant theme for David who had been in his relationship the longest time, 40 years. It seemed that due to his age (70+) and current stage of life (retired) that his life had less potential for change, in terms of the option of having children, or his lifestyle changing drastically. In this case the losses that he mentioned were entirely associated with his partner's changing physically.

“Of course I liked the old style body better I mean I miss the boobs, it took me a little while to get used to smooching someone with a beard. But that was just a matter of getting used to things” (David:164).

Although David did not describe this as a loss of something he actively grieved, it could be interpreted that he experienced a loss of a previous, easier, more comfortable way of life, due to having the added worry of potential discrimination towards himself and his partner, which seemed to suggest a persistent stage of hyper vigilance.

“It can impact on my sense of security, in this day and age when there is so many unhinged people out there, who think that it’s okay to spread their hate violently (...) you can’t read the newspaper without going around looking over your shoulder”(David:360).

From David’s account it seems that this is a situation that he did not see as quickly or easily changing due to the current political and cultural backdrop, and due to this he felt that the only alternative might be to move to a place that is more accepting of his partner and his status as a partner of trans person. While David did not mention a sense of loss or grief in his account, it seems that his life is irreversibly changed, and may change further still.

Often the adjustment to a new life and their partner’s new identity caused mixed feelings for the participants, feelings that did not seem to sit easily together in their support of their partner’s transition. For Keith, this involved mourning the loss of

their partner as they transitioned, while feeling happy at seeing them becoming closer to who they truly were.

“The first real change I experienced was when they changed the way they dressed and stopped doing any make up. I wasn’t bothered about the makeup, I think they were a bit over the top with that before, but the haircut was big you know, I definitely held back tears. I was sad and I was grieving, which was valid, but I was also happy, cause they were getting closer to being who they were. (...) So grieving, that is valid, but you’ve got to do something about it right? It isn’t the predominant emotion that I want to show my partner” (Keith:315).

While Keith seems to acknowledge the validity of his grief, it seems that he sees grief as a stage to be worked through quickly for his partner, so as not to hinder his partner’s progress. This raises the question that if grief is worked through too quickly that it may not be sufficiently processed.

However, a person might not still experience grief and loss even if they did not have the opportunity to experience these transition related changes, such as the case with Sam whose partner did not decide to pursue their transition and whose relationship ended. In this example the loss was not associated with a loss of the imagined future of the relationship and the energy and time invested in it. Although this may seem like something that could be experienced in any relationship break up, what seemed to make this unique to a trans relationship was the intensity of the investment on Sam’s part, therefore making the loss greater, due to the adversity that he had endured for the sake of the relationship. This grief can be said to be complex due to Sam still having this ex-partner in his life but in a different context as

to how he imagined. The focus of his grief seems less easy to locate because of this.

“I didn’t want to face the bereavement, I didn’t want to lose all the effort, love that I had invested, or rather the fantasies I had projected onto this person. (...) it just left me so empty. Yet I still have that person in my life, and I still see him, but he’s not going to transition anymore, and we will never be in a relationship again (...) So it’s a bit of a weird feeling, because I’m one of the only ones to know his secret and he won’t talk about it now he’s decided against transitioning, so it’s almost like that time never existed and it’s like this unnamed thing between us” (Sam:266).

In Sam’s case it seems hard for him to move forward from this sense of grief, because if something cannot be named it is harder to work through. Even if he did find a way to work through it, this might have to be largely in isolation. This helps again to demonstrate how context specific and contingent a partner’s sense of loss can be, and the variety of forms it can take, for relationships that continue and for those that end.

4.3.2 Subtheme 2: Loss of Previous Identity and All This Entails

This sub-theme relates to the experience of the loss of a previous identity and its corresponding label, and what this could entail for the participants. Again this is very context dependent, as it is influenced by the participants’ ‘original identity label’ (in terms of what they are losing) and how they relate to this. For example, Jacob, as a previously identifying gay man, talked extensively about the loss of this label and how this affected aspects of his life, more than the other gay male identifying

participants. In this example he talks about the loss of the easy convenient way that he could communicate his identity to others and relate to them.

“It would be easier to use the label of gay, as people understand that, but I can’t anymore. That was always a very quick piece of information that I could drop that people related to right away and now even still people don’t relate to my sexuality like they did then” (Jacob:45).

The use of the phrase “can’t anymore” seems to underscore the sense of grief contained in this quote, as this easy way of explaining himself to others and them relating to him though this will never exist again. For example, even if he breaks up with his partner he will always have been married to a female.

This was not an issue for straight participants who did not seem to mourn the loss of their straight identity. It seemed as if the straight participants did not feel as strong a union with other straight people based on sexuality. However, it’s pertinent to note that other gay identifying participants who were less attached to the label of their sexuality did not seem to experience a significant loss in this area. For example, Sam found being liberated from the confines of the label beneficial.

“I think what I liked about this relationship was that it allowed me to, and would have continued to help me move beyond the category of gay, as I find it so hard to label myself, it feels too containing like a trap” (Sam:75).

In this account it seems that Sam would have found it hard to adjust his sexual orientation identity in a way that made sense to himself and others without his experience with his partner. This provided him with the means to change his perspective. It seems that this was facilitated by the idea of his partner gradually

changing from one gender to another, therefore he was able to gradually adjust to it in a way that he could manage.

Elaborating further upon Jacob's experience of loss illustrates a contrast to other people's experiences. Jacob's experience of loss was rather different from other participants, and therefore unique in the data set, however it was profoundly expressed. I argue that this is relevant to a particular subset of partners, gay males heavily invested in their sexual minority identity, as it often seems that gay males are often highly invested in their sexual minority identity. By highlighting and comparing to other people's experience it helps to illustrate how context specific loss can be.

For Jacob, as an active member of the gay community there was a loss of community reference when he felt that his status as partner to a transwoman meant he no longer belonged in the community.

"After she transitioned publicly, umm, going to things like gay bars or pride, all those things felt so strange to me. We went to a bar that I've been to many times when I was younger, (...) and I felt out of place. I felt like other people were looking at me and I felt like I was the other coming into that space" (Jacob:389).

However, for the two other gay identifying participants who were not as attached to the gay community this was less of an issue, which suggests that the more someone is attached to their sexual identity the greater the perceived loss.

While losing a sexual identity label can provoke loss, it can conversely help people to gain connections with others. For three of the participants who were previously

straight identifying, their relationship gave them access to LGBT communities and therefore increased their sense of belonging and connection with others, a sense of kinship that they had not experienced before. So therefore it seems that something was gained instead of lost. This is perhaps best illustrated by Keith.

“I’ve always felt more connected to NA [narcotics anonymous] than any other community but outside that, the LGBT community is the only other place I have felt part of. (...) I’ve never felt closer to any other community, there are a lot of strong people in there, compassionate people” (Keith:119).

This helps to show how powerfully someone might embrace the LGBT community and gain a sense of belonging there. In addition it helps to show how people may begin to appreciate attributes in people or specific groups, which they might not have otherwise.

For Jacob, who had enjoyed the privilege of close comfortable, female friendships due to his status as a gay man, now discovered that these no longer came as easily, now that he was no longer gay. He considered this a loss as it was something that he could not easily change without ending his relationship.

“Now there is this strange barrier cause now I might be a weird predator. (...) I feel that that adds a layer of distance between those people that I would otherwise be really close with (...) They either see me as a straight man or as a weird guy who might be gay but is married to a woman and that’s kind of sad” (Jacob:320).

This type of loss could not be experienced by the participants who were not gay identifying so had never experienced this privilege in the first place, or by partners of trans people who were not out or less obviously expressing their gender preference. It is important to note that Jacob’s partner had fully transitioned, and therefore this

might be a prevalent issue for gay partners who remain with their partner as they transition.

This helps to demonstrate how specific loss is to the individual circumstance of the person and the nature and status of the relationship. It could be hypothesised that if partners do end up being perceived to be in a gay relationship that they might also gain this benefit.

However, while loss of a sexual identity and the issues that stem from this were seen as highly significant, it is important to note that loss of identity can cover many other areas, as identity is such a complex phenomenon. Tony's account illustrates how identity can be felt to be lost in a different way. In the following quote, Tony discusses the loss of the use of 'girlfriend' to call his partner (which was his pet name for her) and the way that calling his partner 'boyfriend' seemed to invalidate his identity as the boyfriend in the relationship.

You know I definitely had some of that reaction within myself. Like my identity is... I'm the boyfriend. He can't also be the boyfriend, how does that work? No you've got to be the girlfriend that was the most difficult thing for me to grapple with. It doesn't really make sense, I mean I'm bi. I was just no I'm the boyfriend that's my identity. (...) to call him my boyfriend seem to take something away from my identity. So that was a little bit weird at first (Tony:28).

Tony's reference to the fact that he is bisexual was to communicate that it didn't make sense to him that he should have this issue, as in theory he would be open to having a boyfriend. So this helps to show how this area of loss can be seen to be unrelated to loss of sexual identity.

4.3.3 Subtheme 3: The Provoking of Existential Issues, Related to Fear of Change or Loss

Being a partner of a trans person can cause a romantic partner to be more in touch with existential issues, for example, uncertainty, fear of change and isolation, which could be more or less present at different points in the transition process. This is related to the theme of loss and bereavement, as with any change comes loss. Often these feelings of uncertainty and fear were related to potential future losses that might occur at different points in the transition process, as opposed to events that had already happened.

“I have to deal a lot with the fear of change because it’s kinda scary, you’re kinda used to one person, and changes are soon to come (...) it’s been pretty difficult, it’s like I’m continuously trying to make myself ready for the next step in whatever comes” (Eric:176).

Therefore it makes sense that in response to these feelings of uncertainty that partners may wish to seek a sense of certainty from their partners or elsewhere, however as Sam’s account suggests, this may be problematic.

“I needed more certainty and I realise now that I couldn’t ask him to give me that, that it wasn’t even fair to expect it. (...) But I didn’t feel like that at the time, when I was grasping for some sort of anchor or tether” (Sam:182).

This helps to illustrate the uncertainty and groundlessness that a partner may feel, in particular the double bind that they might find themselves in, of wanting a level of certainty that they cannot demand or expect.

It seems that the increased uncertainty and fear of change was a reason why participants found certain aspects of the transition process more difficult than others. For example, four participants (Erik, Philip, Keith, Tony) discussed how they found

the prospect of their partner beginning hormone therapy more anxiety provoking than later stages in the process. It seems that this was related to hormone therapy being less predictable in outcome than other changes (which might seem more extreme) such as surgery, for example if this could result in changes such as facial hair for transmen. It seems that this triggered more uncertainty and therefore anxiety due to the outcome being less predictable, and therefore partners not knowing how they would deal with these potential changes. This is perhaps best illustrated by Keith.

“I’m not afraid of them getting top surgery, I am afraid of what might happen when they get on testosterone, I’ve had thoughts like, oh well what if they get facial hair, I know that I would not be okay with that, right, and so it’s hard to tell what exactly will happen medically with that (...), I want them to get onto it as soon as possible so that I don’t have those questions, so” (Keith:370).

It seems that this sense of uncertainty is causing Keith to wish the transition to move forward quickly, in his desire to actually experience the changes he is concerned about, hence to reach a place of more certainty.

4.4 Theme 2: Making Sense

This theme attempts to encapsulate the participants ‘making sense’ of their experience from the point of their trans partner’s initial disclosure onwards. It considers how they adapt to the news and how their perspective on themselves, their partner and their relationship changes. This theme is also called ‘making sense’ as a common theme that emerged was that finding out that their partner was

trans did make sense, as it clarified a lot about their partner and the nature of their relationship.

4.4.1 Subtheme 1: The Mystery Solved

This subtheme looks at how partners seemed to simultaneously find their trans partners' disclosure a shock, yet not a surprise, as if on one level they had known about their partners' trans identity, or at least that their partner was hiding something significant from them. However, until that point they had not put the pieces of the puzzle together, perhaps in some cases not wanting to do so. Therefore, their partner's disclosure actually helped them to make sense of things they did not previously understand, for example, the reasons for their partner's gender dysphoria.

“Within a year of being together and I couldn't put an exact time on it, it was clear that Kendell's gender wasn't straightforward. So in retrospect we both should have known sooner it was so fricking obvious” (Tony:8).

This could allow participants to realise certain aspects related to this were not about them, and therefore not to take these personally. For example, their trans partner's apparent lack of desire to be intimate with them was not about their lack of desire for them, but the trans partner's own uncomfortableness with their own body. For example:

“With her it was immediately from the start, (...) before I knew that she was trans, the relationship there was something always kind of odd to me (...) either she was really shy or just really uncomfortable or really not that much into me. (...) then when she came out (...) the things that I thought were weird started to make sense as I realised it was because of how she relates to her own body” (Jacob:186).

For Jacob, the knowledge that certain problematic areas were not about him, but about his partner's gender issues, seemed to come with an immense sense of relief, although it is assumed this could be quickly accompanied with sense of anxiety over what this meant for the future of the relationship.

This topic seemed relevant to all participants bar the two whose relationships were much shorter than the rest (Eric, Philip). It is assumed that this could be due to them having less time to accumulate clues to their partner's gender dysphoria, however for David this involved a making sense of a marriage that was 40 years long.

“Rob decided he wanted to transition, that wasn't a surprise to me, I think I went through at least a short period of “oh my god that can't be true” that kind of thing. But I knew that it was true because I knew him well enough or her at that point, well enough to know that it made perfect sense (...) even when Rob was apparently clearly female he has always been one of the guys actually tending to be a lot more macho than me” (David:9).

This helps to show the apparent paradox between the disclosure not being a surprise but still being a shock and the way a partner may spend time in denial about something that later makes so much sense to them. However, up until the disclosure is made it can be more easily ignored by the partner, the signs can be dismissed and unattended to. Therefore, disclosure can be the point when worries and suspicions become real, therefore when this happens partners are forced to choose what position to take. Although uncertainty and fear of change may be a common experience for partners, in terms of dealing with the aftermath of the

disclosure, it is important to note that this might also give them in other ways increased clarity and meaning.

4.4.2 Subtheme 2: Adapting to the News

Partners spoke about the way they adapted to the news of their partner's disclosure, and the general transition process. This can involve a partner working out what this means for them on a social, sexual and psychological level. Importance was stressed by the participants on the need to be given time and space by their trans partner in order to make these adjustments, and the importance of transition being a joint enterprise. This seems of paramount importance to the participants, due to the fact that they are in a sense catching up with their trans partner to be on the 'same page' as them (due to the trans partner having known about their gender issues far longer than the partner they are disclosing to). This was the case in all but one case, namely Tony, whose partner seemed to realise that they were trans a short time before coming out to him. Therefore in this case this was something that was worked out between them both. However, even in this case (as with the other participants) there seems to be a process of people moving from a place of confusion without solid footing, to a place that is progressively more certain and solid. Perhaps best illustrated by Simon:

"You just keep reminding myself that things will solidify more and more as time goes on. You're going to feel like you're trying to walk on water for a little while, and you're going to fall in and get wet a lot. But that'll turn to walking on Jell-O, which is weird and confusing... but you can kinda sorta manage it. After that, you're back on solid ground" (Simon:189).

This suggests the importance of partners having faith that things will improve in the future in order to find the perseverance to withstand the present.

Of all the participants, only two, Keith and Murray, spoke of seriously contemplating leaving their partner after their disclosure, whereas others who spoke about entering a phase of adaptation and working things out, did not. This seems surprising, and could have been due to them deciding to stay, so downplaying this aspect due to guilt or could be due to them not seeming to even consider this as an option, perhaps due to being so immersed in the relationship, or due to being in shock.

“I was silent for a few minutes. To be honest, I was so confused. The man I know, love, and plan to marry is telling me he is a woman. After my momentary silence I told him, you are still you on the inside and I still love you. I pulled him to me and told him that I love him and I’m not going anywhere” (Simon:21).

In this case it seems that Simon is reacting on a mainly emotional level, not allowing the time to process the news on a cognitive level, to order to consider all the implications before responding. It seems that he reacted this way due to him feeling that this was what his partner needed to hear. It also illustrates how partner focused participants tended to be, prioritising the need of their partner even at times where they are presumably struggling emotionally themselves. The best example of this is perhaps Tony’s account of his partner coming out to him.

“I think he was pretty freaked out about it (...). The following day, I actually called in sick to work to spend with him cause he was having a really rough time with it. Seeing him in that really vulnerable position really put me in care giver mode and I thought about my own feelings about it a little bit later” (Tony:15).

As is illustrated by this excerpt, when asked about his experience of his partner coming out, instead of Tony talking about his own difficulties he focuses on how difficult the process was for his partner. This means that his own feelings about this were processed at a later point. It is possible that other difficult events in the transition journey may also be responded to in this way, with a fall back into default carer mode.

Keith’s account, as one of the partners who had seemed to seriously consider leaving his partner, is important to include here as a contrast. This helps to show the mental processes that someone can go through as a partner and the moral dilemmas that they can encounter.

“So I was contemplating the relationship (...) about, separating in order for the other person to go through their experience, to be not influenced by the other person, I didn’t want to fuck this up for them, maybe we should separate (...) but it would also be morally wrong for me to run from what I truly want, out of fear, right, so I had to figure that out” (Keith:249).

It is important to note that Keith was basing his decision very much on what was best for his partner as well as himself. This seems to suggest that finding the balance between supporting and influencing a partner may be a very difficult line for partners to negotiate.

4.4.3 Subtheme 3: Making Sense of Sex and Intimacy

This subtheme relates to the adaptation process that participants experienced in regards to sex and intimacy after their partner's disclosure, in an effort to remain compatible with their partner. This did not necessarily involve actual changes in sexual activities but a change of mind-set about what constitutes sex and intimacy. In participant accounts it seemed that the partner often felt that they were playing 'catch up' by learning from their partner what was acceptable to them, to get on the same wavelength sexually.

"From his perspective (...) he knows what he can and what he can't do (...) but for me I'm still learning about it (...) there are a lot more different understandings between what he wants for us, and the people I have been with" (Philip:63).

This quote helps to show why this subtheme relates to the overall theme of 'making sense' as it can involve a partner entering into a complex negotiation process, which can make them re-evaluate their current situation and past relationships.

It seemed that the participants' exposure to different ways of being intimate with their partner made them reevaluate their concepts of sex and intimacy. This in turn increased their ability to freely explore this new terrain with less rigid parameters. Although this appeared to be the case for the majority of the participants, Jacob's account put it into context.

"So as it started to make more sense and the way that we would be intimate changed, and so my idea of what sex even is changed a lot because before her it

was pretty easy. It was a straight forward task (...) And after she came out and we began to figure out and navigate that world together, things that I wouldn't have necessarily considered sex (...) became more important and really more part of the full act of what we do, so it really changed my whole perception on intimacy" (Jacob:193).

In this example, it seems a whole new way of being sexually intimate has become possible. However while a significant amount of learning may be involved in renegotiating sex and intimacy, unlike the above example this may not result in a drastically different outcome, as was the case with Tony.

"So some of the things in bed might have changed a bit but not a ton. Just a little, the pieces are different, I'm sure that you are aware about the way the labia and the clitoris change due to testosterone, so going down on him, I've had to relearn how to do that. It isn't significantly different than it used to be, but it's significantly more enjoyable for him" (Tony:370).

It seems important to note the partner focused attitude that is present again in this account, as it indicates that a lot of relearning has been required but does not mention how this investment had benefited Tony himself. This is unless of course his enjoyment is received via the increased satisfaction of his partner.

It seemed that partners making sense of sex and intimacy in relation to their partner was inextricably connected to the gender they saw their partner as being.

Participants seemed to differ on the extent to which they viewed their trans partner

as being the gender they wished to present as, and how much of an issue this was for them. This could have been for a variety of factors, for example the partner's stage of transition or how strictly the cis gender partner adhered to a specific sexual orientation identity. Murray, for example, had real difficulty recognising his partner as the gender they wished to present as during intimacy.

“While he can fetch my attention without much effort, when it heats up, it's physically and emotionally straining to recognise him as a man, even as some part of me desires him as the woman he's not. I feel caught between who he is and who I want him to be” (Murray:127).

This seemed to illustrate a conflict that was not touched on by other partners, some of whom seemed to completely regard their partner as their identified gender. For Philip and Keith who seemed to have an internal representation of their partner's body which matched how it would be at a later stage of the transition process, this was highlighted by their surprise at their partner's current body not already having undergone certain changes yet.

“Sometimes I hug my partner and am reminded he hasn't had top surgery. (...) It's like my default mental image of his body isn't the same as what he physically has, and I have to correct it sometimes” (Philip:43).

Although it is hard to know exactly why this phenomenon occurs and how much it is within conscious awareness, this could be either due to the effects of them already treating their partner as their desired gender, or it could be seen as a way for the

partner to subconsciously prepare for changes that they will later encounter. It also could be something borne out of their desire for their trans partner's body to be representative of who they are internally.

"I've had dreams where we're walking along a beach and they don't have a top on and they're flat (breasts), and they have C cups, well I guess they still do but I see them as flat. I guess I see them want their outsides to match their insides. I see what the gender dysphoria does to them all the time. I just want them to realise their dreams as soon as possible" (Keith:17).

This again seems to demonstrate a very partner focused attitude, which may result in a cis gender partner wishing their partner to transition quicker than is ideal for them (the cisgender partner). This seems to be demonstrated by Keith's use of "as soon as possible".

4.4.4 Subtheme 4: What is the Role of a Trans Partner

This theme relates to making sense, as after a trans person's disclosure partners may feel that they no longer know what their role is as a partner and the position that they should take towards their partner's transition. There are no clear answers to these dilemmas and participants gave different accounts about what their role should be, and how much their partner's journey was their own to navigate. Common themes that emerged often took the form of tensions, for example the extent to which partners felt the need to put their trans partner's needs before their own, or the extent to which they felt the need to be happy about their partner's transition, even when they did not feel this. Or in Tony's case, the tension he perceived between

being a supportive partner and being too overbearing in his advocacy for trans rights. The following quote by Sam illustrates the pressure that partners could put on themselves to meet these internal demands.

“I felt that part of my role was to offer that hope that someone could still be loved no matter what, no matter how much they changed, but that was a bit too selfless and I don’t think he loved me in the way that I needed but it took so long for the guilt not to impact me anymore” (Sam:185).

This helps to show how much guilt a partner can feel over not performing the role of partner as they felt they should and how long lasting this experience of guilt can be, as it can be continued to be felt long after the relationship has ended.

A common theme was the participants’ desire to support their partner and their transition, to the extent that this seemed to be seen as their main role. While participants tended to view their partner’s transition as their own journey to take, for example due to it involving their body, this did not mean that they (the participant) would not be walking beside them.

“Being a partner of a trans person is so much more than just being an ally. You’re there for them when they get their first haircut, whenever they get their first surgery, whenever they make any changes, hoping that you can make things better for them” (Keith:31).

What really shows in this account and those of other participants is a very strong commitment to supporting their partner, in whatever way that is required. *“I want so*

badly, desperately almost for things to be good, go well and be positive for him” (Tony:414). However, this often comes with a sense of ambiguity over how to do this, which can provoke anxiety. Sam’s account indicates the complexities of supporting someone, with whom you cannot be completely impartial due to an investment in a shared version of the future.

“I began to question my motives for everything, (...) I mean would I help him become a woman, just so that he wouldn’t leave me. And that felt really wrong, because I always feel the need (...) support people without a personal bias. But of course I couldn’t do that anymore as it involved me too” (Sam:45).

This account seems to indicate one of the moral dilemmas that a partner may encounter as part of their role as a supportive partner. For Sam, it seems that he is suggesting that as a partner he should ideally not influence his partner’s choice at all yet support his partner to transition, which seemed a very hard line to negotiate.

Expressing happiness regarding the progression of a partner’s transition was a common theme for a substantial number of participants (David, Eric, Philip and Keith). As a result of this, the extent to which expressions of happiness were required as part of the role of being a partner, was considered. The reason for this happiness was unclear sometimes, however it seemed that this could be needed either to express to their trans partner that they were on board with the transition, their desire for their partner to realise their goals or because they wanted to move past a particular ‘road block’ to get on with the rest of their lives.

“Honestly, I’m excited, for him, it will be nice for him not to bind, (...) as that means he won’t need to plan events and stuff, about when he can’t wear it, when he can wear it. I’m very much excited about his up and coming transition” (Philip: 253).

It was not clear how much this sense of excitement and focusing on the positives of transition masked underlying worries and concerns, which are not alluded to.

Expressing happiness for a partner’s transition (as a way of participants showing that they are ‘on board’) could involve participants feeling the need to suppress their own worries and concerns about the wellbeing of their partner due to how this would be interpreted by them. This was even the case when valid concerns were expressed.

“I saw that as part of my role, to be the voice of reason (...). I saw it as part of caring. But he didn’t want to hear it, he saw it as a barrier to his plans, and it’s at times like this, that he could suddenly call the relationship off. So I felt like I had to agree with everything in order to show him that I was on board, and this felt like a being in double bind” (Sam:175).

This seemed like a very difficult position for Sam to be in, with all the options available to him seeming to lead to anxiety. For example, anxiety over his partner’s health and the risks of not highlighting these, versus the anxiety of being misunderstood by and rejected by his partner.

4.4.5 Subtheme 5: How Much is it About Transition and Being Trans

A theme that emerged in the participants' account was them trying to work out the extent to which relationship issues and certain aspects of their partner's behaviour were directly related to transition. For example, it was often hard for the participants to tell which aspects of their partner's behaviour was due to trans related issues such as gender dysphoria and which were due to their personality or other factors. Participants were often left feeling confused and unsure of how to respond in certain situations. On occasion this seemed to mean that participants either justify their trans partner's behaviour based on them being trans, or feel guilty if they do not give them such allowances.

"It's just that sometimes I get angry or upset about some dynamic that, to me, doesn't seem trans-related and then discover that it's largely stemming from dysphoria or anxiety about the transition. (...) And I largely become not upset about it because, well, I get it. It makes sense. (...) I just sometimes want the freedom to be pissed off without having to be understanding or supportive once in a while"
(Simon:125).

This can mean that certain feelings or emotions seem to become almost forbidden, for example anger or frustration at their partner, and the justification process that participants can go through when making allowances for their partner. This seems to be due to them believing that they have to be completely supportive of their partner all of the time, which is an unrealistic and unachievable ideal.

Both Sam and David also elaborated on the difficulties that they had trying to work out how much of their partner's behaviour was related to their partner being trans. For Sam, this involved him reflecting in general about how transgender issues can seem to be related to all aspects of the trans person's behaviour and personality, and consequently the reasons behind certain actions being hard to untangle. For Sam, this preoccupation seemed to concern him trying to gauge how much leeway to give his partner, as if the behaviour concerned trans issues it was more justifiable. However, the realisation that this was impossible to know, meant that the focus changed to what he was willing to cope with in a healthy relationship.

"I mean the trans stuff certainly took over and became central, but he had always been insensitive, avoidant, bad at communicating, I'm not sure if this had to do with him being trans or it was just how he was and had always been. So I started to think more about the way he dealt with things opposed to the issues that arose due to him being trans, (...) and more about what I would expect in any relationship" (Sam:309).

For David, this involved him questioning why his and his partner's sex life had changed, elaborating upon how hard it was to tell whether this was due to natural life changes or his partner's transition.

"We've pretty much given up with having a sex life over the last few years but I think that might have to do with our age, or the fact that Rob's original female body that as soon as he started testosterone put him into menopause and all the changes in a female body that go along with that (...). On the other hand you go through life and people's sexuality and sex drive levels change anyway for all kinds of reasons" (David:290).

For David, this way of making sense of his partner's transition seems to help him normalise this experience, as if the loss of sex with his partner would have occurred anyway, this loss seem more inevitable and less painful.

4.5 Theme 3: Finding a way to cope

A major theme that emerged was the diverse ways that partners found to cope with the situation that they had found themselves in, as a partner of a trans person. From participant accounts it seemed that partners tended to utilise a variety of different strategies, for example becoming educated about trans issues, seeking out the support of people who they feel understood by, and by various other strategies that helped lessen doubt and uncertainty or increased connection with others.

“Yeah I was like this is crazy but really how I coped with it was like, time, education, reading that book [The Trans Partner Handbook], talking to other people, finally talking to other people who understood, (...) talking to people that understood, helped more than anything” (Keith:300).

4.5.1 Subtheme 1: Reducing Anxiety/Embracing Uncertainty

This subtheme includes participants changing their outlook on life, their perspectives on the future and their decision making process, and learning to accept the reality more as it is. This was particularly the case for Eric as well as Jacob, who realised that life could not be controlled or predicted as previously thought. For Eric, becoming a Buddhist with its tenets on impermanence has helped him to accept

change and uncertainty as a natural part of life, which in turn has helped him cope with his partner's transition.

"Buddhism definitely helps. It's been one of the biggest factors which has helped so far. I try to think that whatever happens, if it sucks and I don't like it, life goes on, it's kind of how life is, you know I'm still alive, keep moving forward. It's a temporary pain" (Eric:251).

This seems to raise the question as to how much pain is to be expected in life and relationships, a question which is not easy to answer, but one that a person must decide for themselves.

Partners also discussed the way that they tried to reduce this sense of uncertainty, for instance through becoming educated about trans issues or falling back on comfortable, familiar default patterns. For example, for David as a scholar this involved him delving into researching the topic in an academic way. For Tony, this involved him prioritising his job and career prospects specifically to focus on making money. This was motivated by his anxieties relating to supporting himself and his partner through the transition process, so hence he seems to be focusing on practicalities as a way to alleviate his fears. For Tony as well as Jacob, finding a way to cope with their partner's transition involved them falling into a default caregiving role, thus reducing their sense of uncertainty, as it helped them find a role within their partner's transition. Due to Jacob preferring to focus on practicalities, by doing so he could negotiate his partner's transition more easily. This was due to seeing this process as consisting of many separate steps which could be focused on in turn.

“It’s fortunate for me that I default to that kind of behaviour anyway (being a helper). If I can take a complicated situation that is stressful and put it into a bunch of tasks that I need to do to make the situation better, then that usually helps me. And so fortunately in this situation there were a lot of things for me to do.” (Jacob:428).

It is unclear what purpose focusing on practicalities actually serves, for example, it could be a way of him avoiding processing the difficult emotions connected to his partner’s transition. However, this was not the case for Simon whose coping strategy, writing, helped him to experience his emotions, albeit in a more abstract, distant way.

“On the large scale, you can find something tangible in your life that doesn’t change. Something you can hold on to, something that helps ground you. I have my writing. It’s something I’ve done for decades (...) When you have grounded yourself, you’re more able to look at your relationship, (...) and to start setting up boundaries and making compromises” (Simon:163).

Simon’s writing seemed to help him to ground himself in ‘the familiar’ in a way that prevented him from becoming too immersed in his partner’s issues. This suggests the importance of partners holding onto something of their own as a way to maintain a tether to their own identity.

4.5.2 Subtheme 2: Normalising/Minimising

Many of the participants seemed to go through a process of normalising or minimising their experience, which could have been a method that they used to make it seem manageable to them. In terms of normalising the experience, there

was a tendency for participants to look for comparisons to other potential situations that were more common that could happen to one partner in a romantic relationship, such as them getting cancer. Using such analogies often helped them to explain it to others and thus gain understanding from them.

“It isn’t a cancer diagnosis, but it is a huge relationship stressor like a cancer diagnosis might be. (...) People still widely believe that being transgender is a choice and that the transgender spouse is selfishly choosing to put their spouses, children, and family through all of these changes” (Murray:169).

This seemed to be a creative way for partners to gain understanding and support from others, and to simultaneously create empathy for the struggles of transgender people as a whole.

Participants often seemed to minimise the difficulties associated with discovering that their partner was transgender, to the extent that seemed surprising to the researcher. This was particularly the case for Jacob, David and Murray. For example, David seemed very keen to convey that transition and being a partner to someone who is transitioning was not a big deal, not only for him, but this should be the case for all partners.

“So there are challenges, but there are challenges every day in everybody’s lives, I guess cause of my own experience now, (...) and of all the trans people we have come to know and their partners, (...) I just come to the place where I tell people “it’s just not that big of a deal. (...) It’s just one more thing in life, just one more test” (David:185).

It seems that this verges on being dismissive of the uniqueness of the experience of being a partner of a trans person, and the specific challenges that this brings.

Perhaps by making it more similar to other challenges in life, this makes it more familiar and thus less concerning in David's eyes.

For Murray a coping strategy in this area seemed to involve him minimising his feelings about his partner's changing body, and the bereavement that could naturally be assumed to accompany this.

"Then he wants to get a full mastectomy. Love me some boobs, but I do some research and I come to the conclusion that boobs are just fatty sacks of milk that are arousing for some reason, and that I'll be okay without them" (Murray:30).

It seems that such extreme minimisation can make certain difficult prospects more palatable to partners. However, whether this strategy works in the long run, when partners are actually confronted with the reality of particular changes, and thus cannot as easily deny their significance, is questionable.

4.5.3 Subtheme 3: Seeking Connection

This subtheme looks at how the participants coped by seeking out connections with others. This was complicated by the lack of other male partners with whom they could compare experiences. For some participants (Jacob, Keith, Tony), there was a belief that being understood and connecting with other partners of trans people was dependent on people having very similar experiences to their own, for example, in terms of the gender, sexual identity and gender identity of the trans person they were with, otherwise their experiences were too different to be relatable. However, due to the lack of visibility of this group, this was hard to accomplish and they had no

one else as a point of reference to show them that such a situation was surmountable. Jacob, for example, describes finding ways of coping with these feelings of isolation, for example, by writing about his experience on blogs and reaching out to people on an online support group. What seems significant is his need to find people with a very similar experience to himself, gay males with MTF partners, otherwise their experience was not considered a valid comparison. However, he discusses how blogging to represent this small demographic eventually became a burden.

“So I started writing and I started blogging and I had a couple of articles in the [name of online newspaper] from the blogs and did some of that and it became a little too much, where I got to the point that I felt responsible to be that voice that didn’t exist” (Jacob:556).

The idea of Jacob ‘writing into the void’ really illustrates the rarity of other male partners and therefore the difficulty they might have connecting with each other, as it seems that at one point Jacob might have felt like no other male partner existed in the world with experience like his own. This sense of isolation was also something communicated by Tony in reference to him not having a bench mark of comparison to compare his relationship to.

“One thing that I was really struck by, a couple of years ago when Kendell first came out and was beginning to transition and I was looking for other experiences of other men whose partners had transitioned from female to male and I really did not find any. (...) I mean I just wanted it for reassurance that everything would be okay, and I didn’t find that reassurance (Tony:670).

The reason for this need to connect with people with shared experiences could be partly explained by Keith's account. Part of the reason for this was due to him feeling that both parties (himself and whoever he was communicating with) were beginning from a similar level of understanding, hence not needing to explain their situation as much to them.

“Well I mean there is nothing like meeting other people with shared experiences, right. It's just nice not having to explain certain things to people. Like we'll talk about stuff but we are already starting at a certain level of understanding. (...) it's hard to put into words, it was like finally meeting someone who understands a part of me that no one else does” (Keith:125).

This quote powerfully shows the extent to which meeting people who are perceived to be similar can be beneficial to partners, particularly if they are tired or frustrated at constantly justifying or explaining their experience to others.

4.6 Theme 4: [Seeing through a broader lens](#)

This theme relates to the general broadening of perspective that the participants gained in terms of how they viewed themselves and others. This could include a variety of different elements, for example their changing concepts of gender, masculinity, sex and intimacy, whereas before they indicated that they had seen these areas with a much narrower focus. It seems that this previously narrower focus stemmed from different, yet interconnecting reasons. For Jacob, this seemed in part due to his prior tendency to make judgements and assumptions, as if trying to fit things into preconceived models, which were increasingly abandoned after his

partner's disclosure. For others such as Elias, Parker, and Keith, it seemed that this was related to the opportunity that their relationship provided them with to transcend their conservative backgrounds, which had entailed them seeing things from a more black and white perspective. For Tony, this theme related to the way his partner being transgender seemed to mean that he was shocked out of an auto pilot mode of being, where he was more able to see through the performance of daily life.

In these cases it seemed that the trans partner was seen as acting as a guide or teacher in this new terrain.

4.6.1 Subtheme 1: Broader concept of gender

The subtheme relates to the participants' broadened view of gender in general, in terms of no longer seeing the world, themselves and others as limited to the confines of traditional gender stereotypes. It seems that for the participants this was a natural consequence of being with a partner who throws these gender assumptions into question.

"It definitely forced me to think about it a little more [my gender], I've come to the realisation that a lot of the aspects of my gender were performative rather than something I strongly identified with. Mm almost like you know (...), I get ready for work, I put on a dress shirt and nicer shoes and a male gender right" (Tony: 69).

These type of realisations seem to allow broader perspectives to develop, as illustrated by Eric.

“I personally feel that it has challenged me to reflect on myself a lot more and it’s also allowed me to peer more into the eloquence of gender expression and identity and it has given me a broader perspective on it and such” (Eric:14).

Three participants spoke of the way that their experience of their relationship, and the broadening perspective this brought, helped them to escape some of the effects of a conservative upbringing. This was taken to mean that their experience with their partner had helped them to move away from the values instilled in them in the family home, values that were politically right-wing that reinforced traditional gender roles and heteronormativity. It is unclear as to why this is a common theme across participants, in terms of how a conservative upbringing is related to being drawn to their partner. However, what is clear is how positive the participants felt about this.

“I was very conservative and closed minded about things, (...) gender to me fell under the false dichotomy of black and white, there is only boys only girls, trans people aren’t real as such but now Archie’s help me learn more about how gender works” (Eric:19).

Learning to see through this false gender dichotomy and general broadening of their conception of gender seemed to allow different advantageous possibilities to arise for some of the participants, for example, the ability to transcend what they described as toxic masculinity. While this is not an academic term (and therefore other terms such as hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 2005) or ‘traditional male stereotypes’ could have been used instead this was the participants’ own terminology and there seemed to be a general consensus between them over what this term referred to. This can be worded as the tendency for men to fall into traditional masculine stereotypes and their associated behaviours, such as being emotionless or having a

lot of sex with women. This is toxic due to way that maintaining this image impedes these men from being authentic and the negative effects it can have on others.

“Toxic masculinity is when it starts hurting people for giving into male stereotypes. I think that there’s nothing wrong with being a big strong macho man as long as it’s not preventing you from being a good person” (Philip:110).

Indeed the participants’ use of this term seemed to have commonalities with the definition of Hegemonic Masculinity by Connell (2005), in that it refers to a culturally idolised view of manhood such as ruthless competition, an inability to express emotions other than anger, an unwillingness to admit weakness or dependency and an undervaluing of anything deemed to be a feminine attribute (Kupers, 2005). The preference for this particular type of masculinity leads to other forms of masculinity being marginalised (Connell, 2005). However, it is important to note that in some contexts hegemonic masculinity is not negative, whereas the participants’ concept of toxic masculinity was universally negative.

‘Toxic Masculinity’ was a predominant theme in three of the participants’ accounts. These were younger men from conservative backgrounds who could be said to have been more directly under the influence of toxic masculinity in contemporary society.

As they were cisgender males dating trans people, these participants had to directly confront this issue as a result of their relationship. This has increased their insight into the impact that toxic masculinity had on them, and helped them to transcend it. For example, it allowed Eric to reevaluate the basis of his past relationships with women, to allow for more authentic attraction to people.

“Originally I thought that I was strictly attracted to women and a lot of my attraction to women is a little bit messed up because it’s based on a need for validation [as a man] rather than an actual expression of love” (Eric:409).

However, a broader view on gender might not need to involve transcending toxic masculinity or a conservative upbringing, as this was not a feature of other participants’ accounts such as Simon. As for Simon, this involves him more fully embracing a flexible gender identity than he has previously enjoyed.

“My partner has helped me to have the courage to express myself more as I want to, and I can be pretty feminine at times, even with my huge beard and hairy chest and I do enjoy putting on makeup sometimes and wearing feminine clothing, but on the other hand I can seem pretty masculine. I enjoy blurring the lines and giving off more androgynous vibes as that is how I see myself” (Simon:138).

This seems more possible for Simon due to him seeing gender as less fixed, and due to this, masculinity and femininity can now have different more expansive meanings. This means that it is easier for him to express his masculinity and femininity in a way that feels authentic to him.

However, it is important not to assume that gaining a broader perspective (although this was perceived as a positive aspect by the majority of the participants) is something that is always perceived as advantageous. It seems that the increased awareness that such a perspective brings can have difficult aspects, as illustrated by an analogy by Tony.

“For me I kind of see it as a burden [being increasingly aware of the performance of gender]. I’m a blue pill kinda guy, you can keep the red pill, I can continue to live in

the matrix, happy and hunky dory and never know that it is a matrix, (...) looks kinda rough from the outside” (Tony:405).

For Tony it seems that now that he has seen through the illusion to the real nature of reality that his life is fundamentally changed. It seems that now he has seen this reality that it will be hard for him to choose to deny it, as he has in a sense had an experience (taken the pill) which has awakened him.

4.6.2 Subtheme 2: Broader view of relationships and Romance

The participants' changing views of gender seemed to also relate to the romantic narratives that some of them subscribed to. This concerned a less gender stereotypical expression of affection and hence more freedom and authenticity in romantic interactions. This led to expressions of affection and romantic gestures which were more tailored to the individual and the situation. This phenomenon was best described and in most depth by Philip.

“A lot of the romance that I was familiar with was very Disney and heterosexual. It's very much the guy shows up and asks the woman out, gives her flowers, walks on this side of the road, opens doors, a lot of things that I didn't realise were so ingrained in romance until now. (...) Now I can express romance and affection in ways that I want to and ways that are very catered to him, like making him sandwiches to take to work. Which before I would have thought of as a very feminine thing to do” (Philip:186).

This quote seems to describe Philip seeing through a type of 'smoke screen' generated by the media, reinforced by society and realising that he is free not to subscribe to this version of reality.

However, the participants seeing through a broader lens did not always have to be specifically influenced by gender, or be concerned with their romantic relationships, it could also take a much more general focus; For example, through how they regard people in general and the relationships that they form.

“Now I’m much more open to other people and the way they might fit together. I’m much more willing to step back and look at things with a broader lens” (Jacob:135).

For Jacob, this relates to him previously being rather judgemental about other people and their relationships, with him making quick decisions based on first impressions about whether or not people were suited. However, it seems that as a result of being in a trans relationship that has survived transition and therefore being in the position of receiving similar types of judgements from others, he has learned that such judgements have less validity.

4.6.3 Subtheme 3: Broadening perspective on self and sexual Identity

Participants could view themselves and the world through a broader lens by opening up the possibilities for who they could potentially be attracted to in the future, and the way they changed the labels that they used to describe themselves accordingly. This again helps to show that being in a trans relationship can affect someone’s view of the past, present and future. For Philip, an example of this was his increased openness to the idea of being attracted to non-binary people.

“I feel that by dating someone who is trans and heavily involved with LGBTQ+ community, you also start to realise that there are non-binary people and I could also

see myself having a relationship with a non-binary person and it's not something I have ever considered before and so as a result I might be pansexual as opposed to bisexual" (Philip:76).

The fact that Philip had never considered this before seems to be a direct result of his relationship with a trans person. This could be either due to him being exposed to a partner who is actively questioning their gender, or through this relationship allowing him to access a world where more different types of identities are present.

For Jacob (unlike Philip), broadening his understanding of his own identity did not necessarily involve him changing the identity label he used to describe himself, but involved him adopting an identity label, specifically queer, to be wider and more inclusive. This allowed him to apply it to himself in a way that felt appropriate.

Previously from Jacob's perspective, queer only applied to another group of people, younger and cooler, that he could not relate to.

"Before I started identifying as queer, I thought of queer people as young hipsters, and the group that generally has a lot of gender non-binary stuff going on. It's a group of people that I didn't really identify myself with, I didn't really make a lot of sense to me (...). But after I was able to hark out all the terms and think about how they could apply to me (...) that one just kind of sank in" (Jacob:115).

His understanding of queer became something wider, a concept that could apply to him and to everyone that was not covered by a particular label. This seems to suggest that people can creatively adjust identity labels to suit themselves in ways that they previously would not have imagined.

However, partners may not need to change or even adjust the label they use to describe themselves in order to develop a broadening perspective on themselves

and their identity. Instead, this can involve them allowing themselves more freedom of behaviour and expression without this necessarily meaning that this defines their identity. For example, although Simon still predominantly identified as gay, this does not seem to limit his attractions. It seems to indicate a broadening of perspective as he views his attractions as not indicative of filling the criteria for certain conditions, such as ‘fetishising’ trans people, or necessarily meaning he is less gay.

“Attraction is ever-changing and adapting. I wasn't attracted to women at all before my partner transitioned. But now, women who remind me of her in certain ways catch my eye now and then. My porn habits were strictly gay cis male before now I occasionally seek out trans women and trans men for that, too. I don't worry about that anymore as it's not as if I can only experience sexual pleasure based on someone's transgender status” (Simon:308).

This seems to be one of the possible ways that a partner may adapt their view of their own identity, without needing to change it in a drastic way. However, in this example (as in many others) it is hard to tell whether the experience of having a trans relationship has helped him to embrace an identity that was already present yet unacknowledged, or helped him to renegotiate an ‘new’ identity, more suitable to his current situation. This phenomenon also relates to the following subordinate theme.

4.7 Theme 5: Renegotiating Sexual Identity or Discovering Attractions that Were Repressed

This theme looks at how participants’ notions of their own sexual identity changed as a result of their relationship. All the participants apart from one (David) described their relationship as influencing their sexual identity in some way, however this took

many different forms. Sometimes this involved a partner becoming aware of an identity that they had been previously repressing, for example, Eric who felt that his relationship allowed him to “discover” a bisexual identity, or Keith to discover a queer identity. Or in Tony’s case this involved him not so much ‘discovering’ a repressed identity but finding a way to really own this identity as a result of this being validated by his relationship. So in a sense while the self-knowledge of this identity was already present, what changed was that he no longer had to repress the manifestations of this identity.

“I didn’t admit it for a really long time but being bi was already established so that wasn’t really changed. Nothing about my sexuality was challenged about this really at all. In fact it was maybe a little bit validated (...) we came out together in a way” (Tony:64).

In other cases (Sam, Philip, Murray, Simon) this involved a partner reframing their sexual identity (without changing their sexual orientation label) to become open to different possibilities, for example the possibility of being attracted to women or attraction to non-binary people when this was not considered before. In other cases, this involved people changing their sexual identity label, for instance from gay to queer, to indicate that their sexuality was more flexible than previously believed, such as Jacob.

What seemed surprising was the certainty with which participants said their identity was either ‘discovered’ or renegotiated, as this seems like it would be hard thing to unpack. It also seemed that the participants had reached a stage of being

comfortable with their 'chosen' identity label; this could have been due to participants having had significant time post disclosure to adjust to this.

4.7.1 Subtheme 1 Discovering what was already there

Two participants, Eric and Keith, described the process of 'discovering' an identity that they had previously repressed, partly due to the shame that they associated with less traditional identities and sexual attractions, as a result of their conservative backgrounds. For both of them this meant abandoning their previous straight identity.

"So previously I thought that I was straight. And he helped me see that that I wasn't, to put it rudimentarily. I identify as bisexual now. (...) there were a lot of signs when I was younger, it was just that I was raised in a, you know a very homophobic family. (...) and all those signs that were, were just waved off" (Eric:30).

For Keith this involved him not only realising that he was queer, but also becoming more consciously aware of his attraction to trans and intersex people. This is an attraction he has now learned to embrace due to this being less shameful to him after his partner came out.

"Well I have been of the mindset the whole of my life that I've been 100 percent straight and no questions about it, but it took me six months after they came out to admit (to myself) that I have always been attracted to intersex people, trans feminine and trans masculine people. It was so deep in my subconscious (...). It's funny the way the world works, right, my partner comes out and it's not me convincing myself that I'm queer, it's like oh wow, I was queer. I am queer, right and I always have been this way" (Keith:46).

This turn of events seems surprising and almost amusing to Keith. It seems that he regards it as an unusual coincidence as opposed to seeing himself as being drawn toward his partner and for a particular reason, even if he was not consciously aware of this at the time.

4.7.2 Subtheme 2: Renegotiating Identity or Changing View of Sexuality in General

For other participants there was not so much a discovering of an identity that was already there, but a renegotiating or broadening of an existing identity or a shift in the way they regarded sexuality in general. This seemed to mean that they could continue to justify their attraction and compatibility to their partner without this entailing a change in their sexual identity label. For Murray, this involved him continuing to identify as straight while still recognising the fluidity of sexuality and that attraction goes far beyond the physical.

“I see myself as straight and nothing before has made me question my sexuality. While I am very supportive of the LGBT community, I feel like telling myself or others that I am gay, because I now have a boyfriend, would be lying to myself, just like how he was lying to himself that he was female. But at the same time I now think that sexuality is a lot more fluid than many people realise. (...) I love my boyfriend for many, many reasons beyond the sexual, I find the increased confidence that he has now, that he is closer to being who he truly is, really sexy” (Murray:90).

This account seems to entail a twofold struggle for Murray, as he is not gay, but in a sense is appearing to be so, therefore a way of overcoming this is by not focusing on his identity but instead focusing on sexuality as a concept, which can be adapted to suit.

For Jacob, the negotiation of his identity in relation to his trans partner entailed him changing from identifying as gay to queer. Queer can often be used by people as a way to describe an identity outside conventional categories, for example heterosexual or homosexual.

“Queer seems like that area that doesn’t really have a firm definition. Which is where I sit quite a lot.” (Jacob:103).

This relates to Jacob’s use of the word queer to describe the experience of living in a grey area, and having an identity without ridged definitions, where sexuality is on a spectrum as opposed to being a category.

For Sam, his experience of being in a relationship with a trans person seemed to leave him in a no man’s land with his identity, not quite gay but without another adequate enough alternative. In this account he seems to be caught between trying to define his identity in ways that most accurately describe him but lacking the adequate language to do so.

“I feel like I have had sex with a woman, so I can’t call myself gay anymore. But saying that I’m bisexual isn’t right either (...) it doesn’t accurately describe my attractions to other people. I suppose now I’m not quite gay, but I’m not sure what. I need to make up my own word” (Sam:72).

Sam’s experience seems to illustrate a conflict between feeling the need for a specific sexual identity label and not wanting to take a label if this does not properly fit. This account is useful for stressing how being in a trans relationship affects someone’s identity over the longer term even when this relationship ends.

For David, who did not see his sexual identity as affected by his relationship, the experience of needing to adjust his notion of his own identity or that of sex and

sexuality did not seem to apply. This seemed partly due to him not feeling the need to explain himself to himself or to others, and not caring how other people define him.

“I accept other people’s labels. The way they use them. I have plenty of gay friends. That call me gay, they see me as gay (...) So I take it or leave it (...), it’s not up to me to decide how they call me (...). When people ask me directly if I’m gay, I say no but I’m glad my husband is and we laugh about that” (David:40).

While there was much difference in the participants’ accounts with regards to this theme, what seemed to tie them together was their ability to creatively find a way to stay compatible with their partner as they transitioned. Whether this be through taking the perspective that labels do not matter, through changing their notions of sexuality in general, or embracing more encompassing identity labels. This seems to suggest that no matter what a partner’s ‘original’ sexual orientation identity was, that they may still be compatible with a person whose gender of sexuality seems to challenge this label.

4.8 Theme 6: Embracing the Benefits

This theme summarises the main benefits that participants experienced due to being in a trans relationship. These include increased insight, promoting self-development, strengthening of relationships, renewed purpose, and increased sense of meaning. With regards to these benefits, it is often hard to unpack if these are due specifically to being in a trans relationship, or if they are the result of living through adversity as

a couple, so therefore could be potentially applicable to any relationship that has survived adversity. However, what does seem more unique to the participants as partners of trans people is a sense of liberation in terms of being more able to express themselves in a manner that feels authentic and less constrained by traditional ideologies. This theme is called 'embracing the benefits' because it seems that the participants to some extent "chose" to view them as benefits and at a previous point in time these benefits could have been viewed as disadvantages or challenges. For example, in the case of Tony, his increased knowledge of the performance of gender was perceived sometimes as a burden and on other occasions as something he could utilise in a beneficial way.

"Kendell's transition made me more aware of my relationship to my own gender and how to tinker, how I presented my gender and that made me more aware of how the privilege [white male privilege] is tied closely to how I present (...) cause if I shift it a little bit this way it rocks off tremendously and if I shift it just a little bit this way it ramps up tremendously. So it is what it is, I use it, it works so I'm going to work it."
(Tony:709).

It could also be said that the participants' attempts to embrace the benefits of their relationship could be seen as related to them finding a way to cope in a challenging situation.

4.8.1 Subtheme 1: Increases insight/self-development

This subtheme relates to the increasing insight that the participants seemed to develop as a result of being in their relationship. This could be insight towards themselves or their relationships, which lead to perceived self-development. This

could be due to the rapid amount of change that the participants were exposed to in a short timeframe, which could exceed the pace of regular life changes. The sheer power of this increased insight and the realisations that accompany this can feel so powerful as to lead people to feel that they are seeing themselves and the world in a radically different way.

“A lot has happened in the last six months, I would absolutely say that there has been a lot of changes. (...) I feel like I have much better understanding of how love and relationships work. I feel like I have been blind the whole time. But know that the blindfold is off” (Eric:207).

Obviously dealing with a lot of change in six months is challenging but at this moment in time this is viewed positively; at another point it might have felt overwhelming.

This theme involves the participants learning to move beyond deep seated issues, gaining capacity to withstand discomfort, and moving towards being the person they want to be. This was often through the challenging of existing fears and prejudices, which may not have arisen if the participant had not been forced to confront them as a result of their relationship, as in the case of Eric who perceived himself to be straight before his partner’s disclosure and thus did not have access to LGBTQ communities.

“because of being raised in a homophobic transphobic family, I have a lot of deeply rooted fears and issues (...): I really feel like the progress in the relationship has helped heal a lot of the problems, (...) when you’re in or related to an LGBTQ+ community one way or another you have to deal with a lot of internal struggles (...)

that shape and form you as a person, (...) so I would definitely say that these things come out as a necessity” (Eric:202).

This account helps to illustrate the extent to which an experience of being a partner to a trans person can facilitate a process of exploration which can help someone transcend even the most deeply ingrained issues.

For Jacob, this self-development allowed him to have increased ability to withstand discomfort. This was as a result of being exposed to uncomfortable situations on a regular basis, through the explicit need to talk about difficult topics related to his partner’s identity and transition.

“I think going through a period where you are really uncomfortable, asking a lot of questions and facing a lot of realities that might not be so pretty and having those conversations over and over again (...) really positions you (...) to be able to have that conversation and frame it in a way that we are familiar with” (Jacob:528).

This is an example of how partners gain benefits through necessity in times of adversity. While experiencing uncomfortableness during relationships may not be uncommon during times of difficulty, what may be unique to trans relationships is the degree and pervasiveness of this uncomfortableness. This could be to some extent unescapable due to the pervasiveness of binary notions of gender and how sensitively partners may feel they need to tread.

While other partners did not speak explicitly of becoming better at dealing with uncomfortableness, it seemed to the researcher that they could have all developed in this area, due to their comfortableness and openness during interviews (to a person they had only recently met), for example by opening up and talking about

very personal issues such as sex and intimacy, or attractions that they had previously regarded with shame.

The experience of Sam, who is no longer in a relationship with his trans partner, helps to illustrate that these increases in self insight and development can happen far beyond the end of a trans relationship. While every relationship could be said to teach us lessons about ourselves and our previous relationships, it seems that being in a relationship with a trans person can make certain relational patterns more explicit. For example, being attracted to people who are mysterious or intriguing could relate to a trans partner concealing their identity and a partner being aware that they were hiding something at some level. This could be to the detriment of the open transparent communication required for healthy relationships. People may also become aware that their attraction to their trans partner was based on their ability to act as helper (due to acting as a support to a partner's transition) which could entail a concern that this role will one day no longer be required. It seems an advantage to become aware of these patterns so that people can more consciously choose to maintain them or break them.

“In terms of romantic relationships I think that this experience made me see the common theme of all my previous relationships, I mean the tendency to pick people that I felt needed me, but were distant at the same time (...) because this was such an extreme example it made explicit to me a process that has been happening throughout my life from one relationship to the next” (Sam:125).

It is perhaps due to the relationship ending that it was possible for Sam to look back to fully appreciate these patterns, due to the way that participants seemed to be

immersed in their relationships. This is perhaps why this account was different from the other participants.

4.8.2 Subtheme 2: Feeling liberated

Every participant seemed to experience an increased sense of liberation in different areas of their lives, although the nature of this sense of liberation varied across participants, dependent on their individual circumstances. This was in relation to them feeling that they could express themselves more freely as a result of their relationship with a trans person.

“I feel that it’s a lot more liberating mentally cause if you suppress what you naturally feel, you are only herding yourself one way or another” (Eric:27).

This sense of liberation could in particular involve gender expression. Although a broadening view of gender expression was explored under another theme, the current subtheme did not necessarily involve a broadening view of gender. Instead, it could involve a reclaiming of an aspect of gender that was suppressed, therefore to embrace this aspect was experienced as beneficial.

“Generally I am more in touch with my feminine side than my masculine. I think I kind of repressed my masculinity in some way (...) I didn’t feel like I could compete with other boys, so I took this passive position to avoid that competition, but it definitely made me feel more male (...). And it felt really good to be able to express that side of myself in a way that was really validating for myself and my partner” (Sam:162).

It seems that in the case of Sam this allowed him to become a more authentic whole person, which might not have happened had he not needed to take a more masculine role to validate his partner.

This account helps to illustrate again how context specific this sense of liberation might be, as for other participants (Eric, Simon and Tony) the opposite was the case. Participating in their relationships allowed them to express a femininity which they had longed to express but had previously not felt able to.

“It’s allowed me to express myself a lot more, (...) you could say effeminately. You know, I’ve started to like, paint my nails and just exploring a side of myself that I had repressed for a while, you could say” (Eric:22).

For David and Philip, being with their partners allowed them to break free from traditional male stereotypes as well as to express themselves more authentically. This did not relate so much to them changing the lens by which they viewed these roles but seemed to be more about their partner’s trans status helping to validate and strengthen their existing gender roles. For David and his partner, who had never subscribed to traditional gender roles, this is illustrated in the following quote:

“The more I came to see Rob as another guy the more I was freed from feeling that I had to take on typical male roles in the relationship. We were always wanting to drop stereotypes but once the transition happened that became easier. It became easier in the way that we deal with each other, friends, (...) and the outside world. (...) so suddenly to be free of needing to be someone else’s idea of what a guy was or how two people should relate to each other, it’s freeing” (David:99).

For David, being in a trans relationship seemed to help formalise his preferred way of expressing his gender, which resulted in his identity making more sense to others.

This was ultimately very liberating for him as he no longer had to try so hard in his quest to be authentic.

For Jacob, this sense of liberation did not just extend to his identity but also to him breaking free from his own personal tendencies, for example, to always plan ahead for the future. Relinquishing the need to do this came with benefits such as being able to live more in the present moment.

“When you roll that tape forward and you try and plan for everything to prepare for every scenario or pitfall, or everything that could go wrong, it is so taxing to think about these things cause there are so many things that you can’t plan for”
(Jacob:274).

This led to a reduction in anxiety due to not worrying about the future and the liberating effect that this had for him.

While Jacob seemed to express this phenomenon more explicitly it seems that this was also an issue expressed by other participants, which was reflected in a laid back attitude towards the future, for example a lack of concern about not being at the point that they had expected to be in life due to prioritising their partner’s transition over other things, such as getting married or buying a house.

4.8.3 Subtheme 3: Benefits to Relationships

A substantial number of participants (Jacob, David, Philip, Eric, and Keith) reported benefits to the relationship as a result of their partner being trans. To quote David, “when you go through something that tests you and tests your identity that tests your

relationship and you come out on the other side still smiling, it's bound to be a benefit. I'd say that it strengthens the relationship even more" (David). For Jacob, one of the benefits to the relationship was the increased honesty and openness that he perceived as occurring as a result of his partner's disclosure and subsequent transition. This seemed to happen due to him being aware of how much his partner had hidden from him prior to her disclosure, and therefore feeling that there was greater need to be open and honest now after this. What seems different from this account of a trans relationship compared with another general relationship where one partner has kept a secret, is the extent to which relationship communication is fundamentally changed due to the issue being enduring, ongoing and constantly present.

"We had to create a much more open environment for how we communicated with each other, we had to check in a lot more, we couldn't just relax and resort to how we interacted before cause she had been hiding a lot from me" (Jacob:434).

However, the relationship benefits can extend beyond romantic relationships to relationships with friends and family. In terms of relationship with family, this could involve partners' expectations being challenged, about how accepting their families will be about their relationship. Both Philip and Keith spoke of their strengthening relationships to family as a result of discovering that their family was far more supportive than they assumed they would be.

"Given how I was raised I was expecting I would be excommunicated from the family, (...) opposed to him [father] just indicating that he would prefer it if I was completely straight versus what I am. My parents didn't want this standard that I

thought they did, (...) so I think that there has also been realising that some of these borders were put there by me” (Philip:126).

This seemed to help them see their families in a new light and to take responsibility for their own part in their family dynamic. This seemed to allow the potential for a closer relationship to form.

“Well before he started transition, Kendell was really prone to depression. He has really bad anxiety, panic attacks. So he had really bad depression, really bad anxiety, really bad attacks of both (...). Transition has largely erased both of those things, (...) It’s made a huge difference to his mental health, transitioning, its night and day (...). I benefited from him benefiting” (Tony:383).

4.9 Theme 7: Cultural Influence

While culture was not seen by most of the participants as central to their experience, cultural influence seemed to affect them all in some way. In some cases becoming part of a minority group made participants become more aware of certain cultural phenomena in their society, for example prejudice and discrimination. For most of the participants (who were American) this entailed becoming more aware of the nature of contemporary American society. *“It is quite noticeable how conservative and backwards a lot of the parts of the country are” (Eric:123).*

4.9.1 Subtheme 1: Potential discrimination

It is perhaps due to this increased awareness of prejudice and discrimination in society that many participants spoke of their concern about experiencing prejudice and discrimination. Often this concerned perceived potential discrimination and was not based on actual experience of this, as surprisingly only one participant discussed specific examples of discrimination they had experienced.

“I haven’t got any kind of negative response from anyone in my life. It’s been crazy” (Keith:164).

This heightened level of concern seems to be at least partly due to a perceived cultural backlash that has come in response to a shift in thinking about trans issues in society.

“So over these last 11 or 12 years, that’s been a huge change, and mostly positive but now we are having this big backlash in the United States against all LGBT phenomena (...), and roll back all the progress that’s been made, and all of a sudden people are thinking it’s okay to be violent towards trans people and it becomes scary, I feel like we have to be on guard all the time” (David:123).

This sense of being on guard and wary, perhaps due to this cultural shift, is reflected in some of the other participant accounts, for example, when getting used to being seen with their partner. This concern might not necessarily involve a couple experiencing transphobia, but could involve them experiencing homophobia, if the trans partner passes and thus they appear to others as a gay couple.

“One big change that we will have to get used to is being seen in public as a same-sex couple. My partner usually presents and passes as male, so we are also

adjusting to this as it's a totally new experience to me. I don't quite feel comfortable or safe holding hands or expressing affection to them in public yet" (Murray: 157).

Thus this seems to suggest it is possible for a person to fear two different types of discrimination depending on the perception of the people they encounter and how they present as a couple on any given day.

The perception of potential discrimination seems to mean that participants are often highly vigilant with regards to who they choose to trust with the details of their relationship. This seems to involve a complex process by which participants judge the person or groups they are in to predict how accepting they will be, and this affects the way they describe their relationship and reference their partner.

"I'm pretty lucky that I live in a metro area and that people I do interact with are overall very accepting of it, but I do find if I'm in a group of people that I'm unsure of how they would respond, I would refer to, oh yeah my significant other, oh yeah my partner, whereas if I'm in a group that I feel is very accepting, I will say my boyfriend" (Philip:138).

This can mean that they have the experience of being half-in half-out of the closet, and it is worth considering the complications that this causes for someone in their daily interactions with people and to their understandings of their own identity.

It seems that this fear of potential discrimination may be particularly acute in relation to career prospects. For instance, both Philip and Keith specify that they feared that their employers or colleagues knowing about the true nature of their relationship would jeopardise their careers. For Keith, a way to circumvent this was to strive for a higher position at work where he felt that he would be safer from discrimination.

“I know that some people won’t understand, I mean with work. I’m going to be half way in the closet about it for a while (...) it’s going to stay like that until I’m much higher up, to avoid the discrimination and stuff, (...) I don’t want to be a martyr in the work world” (Keith:159).

It seems that Keith used the word ‘martyr’ due to his hope that one day he will be able to influence his workplace positively by reflecting on his personal experience, however to pursue this aim currently would not lead to a positive outcome for him.

General concerns about what the future might hold culturally were reflected in many of the participants’ accounts, particularly that of David and Tony. These lead them to develop what could be seen as a bleak outlook and wonder if they should move to another country with progressive attitudes.

“I’m not hopeful about the future culturally or legislatively (...). I’m fearful that things are actually going to go backwards and it’s going to be easier today than it will be five years from now. I’m scared about that. I’ve lived in the closet before and I could go back there (...) but I don’t think that physically Kendell can. At this point in his transition he’s gotten far enough that he doesn’t look like a woman, but at the same time he doesn’t pass as a cisgender man either. I think that it’s literally impossible for us to go back into the closet and I’m scared” (Tony:613).

The fear in Tony’s account seems pervasive and ever present and only something which he believes will increase over time. Going back into the closet, which seems to be seen as by him as once being his ‘last resort option’ if his situation becomes unbearable, is no longer possible due to his partners transgender status. It seems

that instead of resenting his partner for being in this situation he instead focuses his frustrations towards the dominant culture.

4.9.2 Subtheme 2: Culture as Catalyst

This theme relates to how changes in the culture of modern society relating to trans issues can facilitate a trans person to come out to their partner, and hence be a catalyst for the partner's own journey of adaptation and exploration. This is due to there being a requirement for culture to provide a context in which such issues and topics can be discussed. The increased prevalence of trans people in media, which mean that trans people were more visible in society, can be said to have led to a 'cultural tipping point' which allows the topic to be more easily broached in conversation, as people are already talking about it.

“The timing of her coming out to me (...) was a really lucky coincidence for us, with Laverne Cox present in pop culture and Caitlyn Jenner shortly thereafter. Following it became a conversation on a scale that I had never seen before so I think that culture influenced it in a big way and really helped me out” (Jacob:223).

Although this was elucidated by one participant, Jacob, it was considered important to include as a subtheme. This was due to it being considered by him as of paramount importance, as if this cultural shift had not happened then his partner might not have felt able to come out to him, and he would have had a fundamentally different experience. It is also considered important to include as a subtheme as it could be argued that as all participants were from a western culture that this cultural shift had influenced the trajectory of their relationships, even if they did not realise it.

This could be due to culture often affecting people in hidden, taken for granted ways, unless of course something happens which calls this into question.

Chapter 5 Discussion

5.1 Introduction to Discussion

This chapter critically appraises the findings detailed in the previous chapter and situates them within the wider context of the existing literature on trans partnerships. This will be done in turn for each of the seven superordinate themes. Where direct comparisons with the existing trans literature are not possible additional more general sources will be included. This is deemed appropriate by Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2009) if these sources help to elucidate and support points which have developed from the process of interview and analysis. Due to the my field of discipline being the existential-phenomenological approach and due to the topic of the thesis, identity, being very applicable to this approach, it is considered appropriate and useful to bring in existential perspectives. This helps to contextualise the findings and show how they can be applied to understand wider aspects of the human condition. This is consistent with the way the research questions and interview guide were formulated, using existential perspectives and the Four World Model of existence (Binswanger, 1942, adapted by Deurzen-Smith, 1988), thus increasing the overall coherence of the research. The use of the Four World Model was influential in allowing for certain themes to arise in participants' accounts, as well as being relevant in their discussions. Where applicable, my personal experience has been added in order to promote reflexivity; however, due to differences in the context of my experience from that of the participants', fewer parallels can be drawn. This was due to me knowingly entering into a relationship

with a trans person, as opposed to the participants who found out their partner was trans sometime after the relationship had become established.

It is deemed important before discussing the individual superordinate themes to draw attention back to the three research questions that were first posed in the methodology section, in order to elaborate on how the themes help to answer these questions. In general the research supports that research questions were pertinent, due to them being applicable to the participants' experience, which is reflected in the themes generated. The answers to these questions are too complex to address succinctly and will therefore be incorporated within the themes presented. However, it can be briefly stated how each were relevant.

RQ1: Does the partner's identity transition in response to their trans partner and if it does, what perceived impacts does this have?

Cisgender partners do appear to make their own identity transition in response to their partner's transition, in terms of how they may change, renegotiate or discover aspects of their identity. Although none of the participants in the study referred to this as a transition, this does not make the changes they underwent any less significant. It could have been due to them wishing to prioritise the enormity of their partner's process of transitioning, that they did not want to use the same term to describe their own experience which, while significant, is different.

RQ2: Do the transition-related issues of the trans person affect the relationship and the wellbeing of the partner?

The themes support the idea that the wellbeing of the cisgender partner is affected by their trans partner's transition, although this can be in positive or negative ways. For example, cisgender partners can initially struggle to adapt to their partner's disclosure and to renegotiate their identity in response to their partner, but in doing so can experience a more authentic identity and greater sense of freedom and liberation. Therefore, it is in a sense hard to distinguish what aspects are positive or negative, due to something initially negative leading to a positive advantage at a later point. It seems that negotiating a challenging experience resulted in increased resilience. However, one issue for partners which did seem to affect them over the longer term was their concerns about the potential discrimination they and their transgender partner may face, or worry that society and culture may change in ways that are unfavourable to them.

RQ3: Does the participants' internal sense of identity relate to how they perceive society's view of them, and how are any potential discrepancies are negotiated?

Participants' sense of identity often did not match how they were categorised by others, and participants dealt with this in a number of ways. For example, through seeming not to care how others defined them, thus being less attached to the labels others may use. Some participants adapted a broader identity label such as queer in part to deal with the way society viewed them. This helped to circumvent this problem as, due to queer being such a fluid concept and umbrella term, it is less clear what it means to others in the first place, so they are less able to project specific identities onto people which might not be accurate.

5:2 Context Specific Sense of Loss

This theme attempted to cover all the different types of loss that seemed significant to the participants. These losses were considered to be context dependent, as what the participants could lose was determined by the nature of their identity and their lives prior to their partner's transition. Therefore, this defined the parameters of what the participants felt they had lost. For example, participants who identified as gay could experience the loss of a gay identity and community reference in LGBT communities. However, this was not the case with straight-identifying participants, who gained access to LGBT communities and the advantages this allowed them. Therefore, one person's loss could be another person's gain.

Participants could also experience a loss of a previous way of life, which also related to a loss of previous plans and goals for the future. The intensity of the loss experienced did not necessarily relate to the length of the relationship pre-disclosure, but could be dependent on the life stage of the participant and life partner. It seems that dealing with this type of loss involved partners experiencing complex grief, by which they simultaneously mourned the loss of their partner as they once knew them, while trying to positively embrace the changes they were making to their partner's identity. It can be said that this process provoked various existential concerns related to uncertainty and fear of change. This was related to loss, as with any change comes loss of some form, participants were concerned about how

certain impending stages of the transition process would affect them and their relationship. In particular (for the participants whose partners had not already undergone it) hormone therapy seemed to be something that concerned participants due to how unpredictable the outcomes of it were.

In terms of my personal experience, I reflected on how different my sense of loss was from that of the majority of participants. My sense of loss while I was in a relationship with a trans-identifying person revolved around the potential loss of the relationship itself, as opposed to the loss of a certain lifestyle or identity changes experienced as a result of being in the relationship. This was because of the precarious nature of the relationship itself; my partner could not decide whether or not they wanted to progress through transition or whether they wanted our relationship to continue; these decisions were frequently made and then changed again. This meant that I was constantly expecting the loss of the relationship as a whole, which meant that I had less time and space to consider what I might lose from my partner transitioning. As my relationship ended before my partner transitioned this meant that I did not reach certain 'milestones' that the participants encountered, such as their partner receiving hormone therapy, which meant that my sense of loss was different from the majority of the participants. After the relationship ended, my sense loss seemed centred around the loss of my own time and energy that I had invested in the relationship. For this reason, Sam's experience, as the only person whose relationship did not survive, is the experience that I most relate to. However, this theme in general reminded me not to generalise my experience with that of others, as loss is so context dependent.

With regard to the literature many of the reasons for experiencing loss that the participants described were represented to differing extents. While partners of trans people in this study did find aspects of the process challenging, they did not seem to react with as much pessimism to the news that their partner was trans as partners in studies such as Lev's (2003). Unlike Lev's (2003) study, the participants in this study did not seem to consider their partner being transgender as an insurmountable obstacle to the survival of the relationship. This could explain why participants in the current study experienced less of a sense of loss of a previous way of life, as they did not view this as an inevitability.

However, in adjusting to their partner's transition the participants did seem to experience forms of 'ambiguous loss', as defined by Boss (2007). However, while Boss (2007) used this term to refer to a person mourning someone who was physically present but psychologically absent, in this context this referred to partners doing the opposite mourning someone who was psychologically present but physically absent. This could refer to partners experiencing grief at certain stages of the transition process, particularly those that signal significant change. Similarly to research by Rena and Moshe (1996), it seems that participants feel a need to hide this expression of grief from their partner in order to support or protect them.

The loss of community reference, as experienced most acutely by Jacob due to his past involvement with the gay scene as a gay man, related to the literature on lesbian partners, who experienced a similar loss for example, research on lesbian partners of trans people (Brown 2009; Theron and Collier 2013; and Pollard 2018).

In these examples, being seen as being part of a heterosexual couple by others seemed to hinder people's ability to be part of the LGBT community they felt they once belonged to. The difference in Jacob's case was that it seemed to be more about his own perception of him not belonging rather than other people's, which caused him to lose a sense of community reference. Whereas in research by Pratt and Bolland (2018), partners seemed to feel actively excluded by community members and denied a voice.

Similar to the findings of this study, where some participants experienced gains in the same areas (membership to LGBT communities) that others experienced losses in (loss of a gay identity), the wider literature also supports the idea that loss is context dependent. For example, while many sources indicate a loss of identity of some kind, Pollard (2015) shows how people (who previously identified as non-heterosexual) may be able to embrace the benefits that heterosexual privilege offered them.

There does not seem to be any research in the trans field which elaborates upon the benefits that (previously) straight partners may perceive from membership to LGBT communities. It is unclear exactly why this is but it may be due to recent research focusing on 'non straight' women (Brown 2009, Brown 2010) who are likely to lose community reference as opposed to gaining it. However more general research in the LBGTQ field can be applied, for example that by Rostosky, Black, Riggle and Rosenkrantz (2015), which stresses the positive impacts of straight people becoming involved in the LGBT community. This research, which focuses on positive

experiences of allies of LGBT individuals, showed that they gained various benefits such as increased sense of purpose, perceived self-development, increased interpersonal relationship satisfaction and, most relevant to the findings, a sense of community belonging. Being an ally allowed participants to access diverse communities united by a sense of collectiveness and to enter, as one participant described it, “a sanctuary for individuals of all sorts” (Rostosky, Black, Riggle & Rosenkrantz, 2015, pg 5). This helps to show how trans partners can give their partner a ‘gift’ by allowing them access to these communities, and that a trans person’s disclosure to a loved one may entail the destruction of one way of life, but can also open up a new one. This would fit with many of the participants of the study transcending conservative backgrounds as a result of their relationship.

Due to this being a discussion about loss and grief it seems apt to apply the work of Kubler-Ross (1969) and the change curve of grief. Although this was originally applied to people who were terminally ill, Kubler-Ross (1969) later proposed that this model could be applied to any dramatic life changing situation. Therefore, this indicates that it can be applied to the partners of trans people with regards to their trans partner coming out to them. While participants seemed to have gone through earlier stages of this model at previous points (shock and depression, anger and depression) it seems that they were now, (perhaps due to enough time elapsing since the partner disclosure), all in the last stage, namely acceptance and integration. This is surmised due to the participants displaying many of the characteristics that are indicative of this stage for example, the tendency to embrace new opportunities, a sense of relief that the change has been survived or a feeling of impatience for the change to be complete. This seems to relate to what some of the

participants described in their accounts for example, the straight identifying participants embracing the privileges of LGBTQ membership, and the excitement that some of the participants felt about the prospect of their partner progressing through certain stages of their transition. This helps to support Kubler-Ross's (1969) assertion that her model can be applied to any life-changing situation.

Encountering complex grief within the findings prompted a further exploration of existential perspectives on loss, particularly that of Derrida an Algerian-born French philosopher and one of the major figures associated with post-structuralism and postmodern philosophy (Kritzman, 2006). In particular, 'The Work of Mourning' (Derrida, 2001), a book written over 20 years containing his experiences of mourning the death of different friends and colleagues, applies in this context. While this book concerns mourning friendship, many parallels can be drawn to enable it to be applied to romantic trans partnerships. This is particularly in relation to the unresolvable conflict of loyalty that Derrida (2001) argues a person experiences as an unavoidable consequence of the death of friend. This conflict of loyalty seems to be what the partners of trans people experience as their partner transitions. For Derrida (2001) this conflict occurs because a person is not just mourning the loss of their friend but the loss of part of their own selfhood, the part of their world that they have constructed around the friend who is no longer here. Therefore, this mourning represents a conflict because while a person wants to direct all their grief towards their friend, they cannot due to the loss of their own emotional world. "[A] stretch of [our] living self ... a world that is for us the whole world, the only world ... sinks into an abyss" (p. 115).

This relates to the complex grieving process that some of the partners of trans people can go through. While their partner is not dead, in a sense their former wife/girlfriend or boyfriend/husband might be, and so too is the part of themselves that shared the world with them. This unresolvable conflict that Derrida describes relates to the cognitive dissonance and guilt that was elaborated upon by Murray, who felt he had to grieve the loss of his partner as he once knew him but could not seem to do this without feeling guilty or disloyal.

The perspective of Wong (2008) also applies in terms of emphasising the pervasive nature of grief which, similarly to Derrida, suggests grief is the loss of the world, a conflict that is not easily resolvable. In particular, grief involves the destruction of the assumptive world or, in other words, the assumptions and beliefs that a particular person holds that orientate and stabilise their life, the very structures that once gave them meaning (Wong, 2008). The destruction of these structures, as experienced by the participants, therefore, means that they have less of a foundation upon which to build their identity at this time.

5.3 Making Sense

This theme related to the multiple ways that partners made sense of their experience, beginning at the point of disclosure onwards. Part of the reason why the theme was named Making Sense was due to the trans person's disclosure (of being trans) making sense to the participant when they looked back in retrospect at their relationship. Therefore, the disclosure, while being a shock, was not necessarily a surprise. This is something that I very much relate to with my personal experience, as I was not surprised by my partner's disclosure and it did help me to make sense of their behaviour. However, this was different from the participants' experiences as my partner disclosed to me before we were officially in a relationship, therefore it helped me to make sense of some of the particular dynamics within the friendship. For example, why it felt partly like a romantic relationship but partly like a friendship, as my partner was contemplating the idea of a relationship with me, but would not commit to this possibility until after he came out to me.

Surprisingly, only two of the participants disclosed thoughts of leaving their partner. This was deemed surprising due to survey research by Kirk-Roberson, (www.t.vox.org) finding that around half of partners respond unfavourably to their partner's disclosure. It is assumed that this was due to either participants not wanting to elaborate on this (during the interviews) after deciding to stay or them being so caught up with just dealing with what was happening at the time and what this meant, that they were not reflective about their situation. This could be also due to them being biased in their recall of past events in their relationship. This possibility is supported by longitudinal research on memory bias in relationships by Karney &

Coombs (2000). This research focused on wives' recollections of the past history of their marriage. The finding supported the theory that particular memory biases could act as mechanisms to support relationship satisfaction in long-term relationships.

Further research by Luchies et. al (2013) elaborate further upon the reasons why romantic partners may have biased memories, utilising the risk regulation model (Murray & Holmes, 2009; Murray, Holmes, & Collins, 2006, as cited in Luchies et al. 2013). This model argues that relationship partners with a high level of trust tend to emphasise relationship-promotion goals (goals that tend to lead towards greater relationship closeness) and those people that have a low level of trust in their partner are more likely to emphasise self-protection goals (goals that are likely to lead to a person withdrawing from a relationship in order to avoid threat). This is due to the risk involved with becoming closer and more dependent on another person, as it increases the chances of feeling hurt or rejected. Luchies et al. (2013) use the model to propose that people with a high level of trust in their partner are more able, and therefore more likely, to view past partner transgressions in a relatively good-natured light, in comparison to those who have lower levels of trust. In this case, transgressions are defined as any event in which a partner is perceived by the other to have behaved badly and violated relationship specific norms (Luchies, et. al, 2013). This relates to the current study as a disclosure of a trans identity can be regarded as a type of transgression, as it reveals a lack of honesty and transparency within the relationship; in some cases this is perceived as a deception. For the relationship to recover from this deception it will entail a process of rebuilding trust, which was detailed in some of the participants' accounts. The vast majority of the participants in the current study seemed to display high levels of trust and interpersonal closeness towards their trans partner (8 out of 9, or all of the

participants who were in current relationships). The risk regulation model and the corresponding research by Luchies et al. (2013) helps to provide an indication as to why participants may have been positively biased (if indeed they were) when talking about past events in their relationships, such as their adaption to the partner's disclosure. Marcia (1980) identified various identity types, and by extension how they are likely to respond to an identity crisis, one of which can be applied to this phenomenon: 'the foreclosure type'. This is characterised by a lack of expression of strong feelings, and a repression of inner struggles, that makes committing to the status quo easier. Therefore, if the participants have a tendency towards the foreclosure identity type, it may not be so much that their memory is biased; it may simply be their experience being influenced by their identity type.

Making sense related to how the participants re-negotiated sex and intimacy which depended upon how they viewed their partner's gender (the extent to which they saw them as being the gender they wanted to be regarded as) and their capacity to relate to this. Often at some point soon after their partner's coming out, participants experienced a sense of role ambiguity, which required them to make sense of their role in the relationship and the position they took towards their partner's transition. Often, they saw their role as being that of a highly supportive partner who assists their loved one's transition in every possible way, not letting anything that they might do hinder this. At some point, perhaps due to transition having a very global impact upon their lives, participants tend to question how much the issues they are experiencing in the relationship are due to their partner being trans, and how much these are to do with other non-related issues. It seems that it is important for participants to query this as they did not want to give their partners too many

allowances based on this, but also due to the guilt they may feel if they did not give them enough.

Previous research does not seem to consider the extent to which a trans person's disclosure (of being trans) was completely surprising to the partner concerned or whether it made sense to them on some level retrospectively. Instead research has focused on how partners adapt to the news and the adjustments they make to their lives and identities (Bischof et al., 2011; Forde, 2011 and Joslin-Roher and Wheeler 2009). However turning to more general research on relationships can help to put this in context, for example, research by Rosenblatt & Wieling (2013) emphasises how much is 'unknown' in romantic relationships. This relates to the current study, as the 'unknown' is used as a concept, not to refer to things that are truly unknown, as in the state of 'unknowing' one may suspect a lot. For example, one may have a good idea that a partner is having an affair but not seek out proof of this, due to not wanting to confirm it. Indeed, this research emphasises how any particular aspect of a person, which can become known by a partner, depends as much on the partner's ability to know as it does on the transparency of the person concerned. In other words, this is summarised by Rubin (1983) as, "people can find it too threatening to know certain things about a partner that they might not let themselves know them" (Rubin 1983, pg 21, as cited in Rosenblatt & Wieling 2013). This could relate to a partner of trans person who may have suspicions that their partner is concealing issues with their identity but not want to deal with this.

With regard to people reacting to the news that their partner is transgender, previous research does not focus on partners that choose to leave the relationship, or the decision making process that people go through when working this out. The reasons for both of these types of omissions are unknown but in terms of research not focusing on people who decide to leave the relationship this could be due to partners wishing to put the experience behind them. As a result these 'ex partners' are unlikely to want to take part in research so will therefore be difficult to access by researchers. People who choose to stay may minimise their deliberations of leaving, when this period of time is reflected upon, hence seeing this experience through a more positive lens. This again relates to Rosenblatt & Wieling (2013), who argue that because people's selves are continuously being formed through interactions with others, there is no fixed self and therefore the self that reflects back is not the same self who experienced what is being reflected upon. This means that people change what they make of the past, what memories are available to them and what they choose to emphasise at any given moment. So, a partner of a trans person who is trying to make their relationship work is likely to emphasise different parts of their experience than someone who is seriously considering breaking up with their partner.

The majority of the participants in the study seemed to be in the process of trying to make their relationships work, and due to this could have failed to emphasise some of the more difficult aspects of this process, instead simplifying it. For instance, Jacob, who seemed to simplify his decision-making process by stating that he just simply picked "one fork in the road and went with it", making this seem like a one-off choice as opposed to choosing to continue his relationship every

day. This seems to relate to Sartre's (1943) concept of bad faith. Sartre, a French philosopher, was one of the main 20th century figures associated with existentialism and phenomenology. In his early work he focused on contrasting two different 'modes of being' that people could occupy: an oppressive, spiritually destructive conformity which he named 'bad faith', and an authentic way of being named 'good faith' (Sartre, 1943). This became a main tenet in existential thought and highlights the fact that we are always free to make choices regarding our own lives (Schrift, 2006). While Jacob felt he freely made one choice, he did not acknowledge the freedom he has to make different choices; in other words, to take another fork in the road at any time. Once Jacob had picked one road to travel he may have felt committed to keep going down this route. He seems to, as Sartre (1943) argued in the case of bad faith, use his own freedom as a tool to deny his freedom, as he knows that he is free but refuses to concede this. Alternatively, he could have been said to have been utilising the 'foreclosure identity' style (Marcia, 1980), where inner struggles are repressed in order to more easily commit to the status quo. This leads to a situation of high commitment to a particular course of action without active identity exploration or an identity crisis being experienced (Marcia, 1980). Furthermore, this could help to explain why Jacob did not seem to fully acknowledge the active decision-making process that he was engaged in and how this was having a daily impact upon his identity.

With regard to partners making sense of sex and intimacy, compared to the wider literature, the findings seem to share some similarities. For example, Murray's doubts over his changing sexual compatibility with his partner relate to the study by Brown on lesbians partnered with trans men, particularly the account of one

participant, *“There’s a whole lot of grey area for where he may end up being comfortable with transition and a certain amount of grey area for my own sexuality and orientation, I’m just hoping that this is compatible”* (Brown, 2010 pg 4). Murray’s strategy of adapting his concept of sex and sexuality, thus forgoing the need to alter his identity label, relates in part to Platt and Bolland (2018). This is in regards to how one male participant in their study (Mathew) expanded his ideas about sex and intimacy, for example by an increased awareness of how much of sexuality goes beyond physical body parts. In the current study David’s experience of deciding to no longer have sex with his partner may relate to Idso (2009) in which participants no longer considered sex a priority, with greater importance being given to being intimate in non-sexual ways. However it is hard to tell whether for David this was directly due to the impact of his partner’s transition or due to other factors such as the aging process. The research by Platt and Bolland (2018) seems to relate to the experiences of Jacob, Simon, Philip, and Keith in the current study. For these participants as well as some of the participants in the study by Platt and Bolland (2018), adapting to their partner’s changing body simultaneously caused complications for intimacy while opening opportunities for new ways of being sexual. These seem to be opportunities that many of the participants in both Platt and Bolland’s study and the current study tried hard to embrace.

None of the participants described their own adaption process as a transition, in parallel to their partner’s. This is different from some of the partner accounts in other research, for instance Platt and Bolland (2018) study Mathew stated that following: *“I think that is really important to remember that as your partner transitions, what you’re going through is a transition of your own”* (Mathew, pg: 1259). Whereas the

participants in the current study saw transition as being a phenomenon that described their partner alone, and their role being to walk the transition journey with them. However, just because participants did not view it as a transition for them, it does not mean that it is not one. This could be just a matter of semantics with regards to the terms they use to describe their journey. They may, for example, choose not to describe their journey as a transition, in order to distinguish it from their partner's journey, which is captured under this term.

Yet, while all participants stressed the importance of supporting their partner, how to best support their partner and themselves on this journey was a subject of ambiguity. For example, the struggle the participants faced of how to best balance their own needs with those of their partner. This is highlighted in Pratt and Bolland (2018), most specifically by Dana's account: *"For the most part, it's centred her direction and I'm okay with that for the most part. That's one of our struggles is you-to not make everything about one person or one things or whatever and kind of spread the love"* (Dana, pg: 1259). Similar to this, Rozek (2016) emphasises the extent to which partners can minimise their own needs in the transition journey, by focusing on the partner's transition as opposed to their own process of adaptation, *"We reduce ourselves to passengers, whose sole job is to be pillars of support"* (Rozek, 2016). The tendency for all the participants in this study to focus on their partner in such a way seems to relate to the thinking of Simone de Beauvoir (1949), specifically her theorising on relationships. De Beauvoir, a French writer, intellectual, political activist, feminist and social theorist, had a significant influence on both feminist existentialism and feminist theory (Bergoffen, 2010). De Beauvoir argues that people frequently use relationships as a form of escapism from aspects of the world that they do not want to attend to, in their efforts to gain security. However, this

becomes an issue if people rely on a romantic relationship as their only source of meaning. This is a risky strategy to use due to the likelihood of the relationship breaking down and, thus, this source of meaning being lost. It seems partners of trans people can be at risk of doing this, through reducing their source of meaning to their partner and their transition, and themselves to a 'pillar of support'. It seems likely that the more they invest into this way of being, the more they will suffer if the relationship comes to an end. This seems to relate to the experience of Sam, as the only participant whose relationship had broken down.

The preoccupation that many of the participants in this study had with working out how much of their partner's issues and their relationship issues were attributable to their partner being trans, was not a phenomenon that seemed to be highlighted in the literature. However, the findings relate in part to Bischof et al. (2011), in which partners (in this case wives) spoke about the central position their partner's transition took in the relationship, with everything seeming to revolve around this. So, it is likely that at some point partners would begin to question to what extent their whole relationship should be focused on their partner's transition. It seems that it is a natural tendency for people in relationships to become preoccupied with problematic issues which they perceive as not easily resolvable, and this focus make these issues central. This could be for any number of issues, for instance financial issues. Conger, Reuter and Conger (2000, as cited in Davis, 2004) have demonstrated that if there are financial issues in a relationship, couples become preoccupied with everything related to finances, and their perceived lack of power in this area often causes frustration. Therefore, transition-related issues may become central to a

relationship in a similar way that other issues which are perceived as problematic and out of one's control often do.

From an existential point of view the desire for partners to pinpoint how much of their relationship issues are linked to trans-related phenomena, can perhaps relate to the human tendency to want to separate things into distinct categories. This is in order for the person concerned to feel that they can better comprehend and handle particular issues, while in reality this is an illusion as there are no rigid dividing lines and the realms of existence intersect and everything by its nature is interconnected (Van Deurzen & Adams, 2016). Use of the word realms in this context could refer to the spiritual, psychological, social and physical aspects of the experience of being a partner of a trans person, which are all fundamentally connected.

It seems that a person coming out as trans to a romantic partner can be an event in which the sharing of more information actually increases uncertainty as opposed to decreasing it, which is more typically the case. This happens when the information is inconsistent with the receiver's pre-existing knowledge, therefore this pre-existing knowledge is undermined (Planalp & Honeycutt, 1985). It is highlighted by Planalp & Honeycutt (1985), that when this happens a critical turning point for the relationship may be reached. This may influence the outcome of the relationship for good or ill as a person will have to negotiate the uncertainty and emotions triggered by this turning point. It seems therefore that a partner coming out as trans represents a turning point (fostered by an increase in uncertainty), which a partner will have to negotiate and make sense of. However once a person has done this the

knowledge that their partner is trans may actually in retrospect help clarify certain aspects of their partner that they did not previously understand. Additionally subsequent conversations (if there is good communication present) will help the cis-gender partner gain further clarity, and this will be a case of information increasing certainty due to it building upon what is now known, as opposed to it being inconsistent with what is already known.

5.4: Finding a way to cope

The next theme captured the strategies that participants used to cope with the challenges they experienced as a result of their partner's transition. A variety of ways of coping were mentioned but education and connecting with other people were particularly prevalent. It was theorised that many of the strategies that participants employed were adopted to reduce the sense of uncertainty that was provoked by their partner's disclosure/transition. This included for example, falling back on default patterns of behaviour that felt familiar to them. One way for participants to cope with the situation could have been for them to normalise and/or minimise the enormity of the experience in order to make it more palatable to them. Normalising the experience could have been a way for them to explain it to others, which could involve participants using analogies that they feel others will relate to. Participants seemed to desire to connect to others who they perceived had very similar experiences to them. However, this was often difficult to achieve due to the lack of numbers and visibility of other male partners of trans people. The advantages of

connecting with people with similar experiences were that participants felt that they were understood by someone more quickly and with less explanation, as they were starting from a similar level of understanding.

I feel, from my personal experience, that I did not have the opportunity to develop many of the coping mechanisms used by the participants due to my relationship being less stable and through being unaware of sources of support, such as online communities for partners. What I do relate to, however, is the tendency to revert into default patterns of behaviour, such as the caring role, as this is something I did, perhaps as a means to feel useful and needed within the relationship. What I did not realise at the time was that there might be many of these default positions that people can take in response to their experience, and in general the variety of ways that people can find to cope. I found that exploring this topic helped me to understand how identity and coping are interrelated as the default coping mechanism that someone might utilise may be very grounded in their identity, such as a scholar, or caregiver.

To a degree it seems strange that research on this field has not revealed the specific strategies that partners of trans people use to cope with their experience, and instead has merely described the journey that they embark upon and the way they adapt. This lack of focus on coping strategies by other research might be partly due to partners of trans people being so focused on their partner, that they spend considerably less time reflecting on their own emotional needs, therefore being less aware of their emotional coping mechanisms. Therefore, in order to draw comparisons, more general research and literature must be considered.

One framework that can be applied to aid the understanding of how partners of trans people might cope, is Sense of Coherence (SOC) (Antonovsky 1987, as cited in Rena, Moshe & Abraham, 1996). This is a theoretical construct used to understand how people cope with a stressful event by examining what external resources they utilise (Rena, Moshe & Abraham, 1996). A stressful event could be adapting to a partner becoming disabled, or in this case a partner disclosing that they are trans. This framework is made up of three interrelated components, namely comprehensibility, manageability and meaningfulness. Comprehensibility refers to the extent to which a person perceives everything related to the event as understandable, well ordered and predictable. Manageability refers to how much a person believes they have adequate internal resources to deal with the situation. Meaningfulness encompasses how meaningful people perceive the event to be and how willing they are to understand it and cope with it (Rena, Moshe & Abraham, 1996). Since more successful coping and adjustment relates to a higher overall SOC it is useful to look at the extent to which this is applicable to the participants in this study. In terms of comprehensibility, this could explain why partners were motivated to educate themselves on trans issues, or seek out people with very similar experiences to their own, as a way to more fully comprehend their situation. It also helps to explain why particular aspects of the process were more difficult to cope with than others, due to being less predictable for instance, hormone therapy. In terms of manageability, this could explain why partners seemed to minimise the challenges associated with their partner's transition, as this could have been a way of making them seem more manageable. It also helps to explain why partners tended to fall into default coping mechanisms, as in doing so they were in their

comfort zone, a place associated with being more in control. For example, this was the case for Jacob, where he reverted into his default caregiving role which had the advantage of him focusing on providing practical help which could be broken down into manageable steps. In terms of meaningfulness, this could explain partly why participants made sense of various events in retrospect after their partner's disclosure, as in doing so the experience was imbued with more meaning, an eventuality as opposed to a random unexplained event. This was particularly the case for David, in his elaborations about how his then wife was almost more macho than him and, therefore, it makes sense that he would wish to transition.

We can use the SOC model to help explain the contrasting experiences of some of the participants, for example Sam and David, whose experiences were very divergent in terms of how secure they felt in their relationships and how positive an experience their relationships were for them. It was very difficult for Sam to have a high level of comprehensibility due to the way his trans partner frequently and suddenly changed their mind about whether or not to progress with their transition, and contingent on this was the maintenance of the relationship. Therefore, events could not be ordered or predictable for him, neither could they be seen as manageable as he did not know what he needed to be able to manage (the continual adaption to his partner's transition, or the break-up of the relationship). However, for David, whose partner's transition followed a slow and steady course characterised by good communication and mutual decision-making, it can be seen how in this case there would be higher levels of comprehensibility and manageability.

Considering perspectives from identity theory can help illustrate how identity styles and coping are related by elucidating the strategies individuals choose to cope with situations they are presented with, as dictated by their needs and preferences. For example, in relation to the way David and some of the other participants used education and knowledge in a flexible and adaptive way as a means of coping. This relates to Berzonsky's (1990, as cited in Schwartz, 2001) 'informational' identity style, which describes an individual who is actively seeking information with an open mind and who is willing to re-evaluate their commitment to certain options in light of the new information they encounter. This style has a higher chance of leading to problem-focused coping than others such as the 'normative' style which applies to people who are taking a more closed-minded and dogmatic approach to the situation that they are presented with (Schwartz, 2001). As the informational style is considered the most adaptive style, this could explain why David, and the other participants who seemed to follow this approach (Jacob, Keith, Eric, Philip, Tony), had a high level of satisfaction with their decisions and reported positive aspects from their experience, such as increased self-esteem and self-development.

An exploration of 'meaning making' as a means of coping is included due to its relevance to the existential approach, which focuses on how people attribute meaning to a life that would be essentially meaningless otherwise. The perspectives of Sommer, Baumeister & Stillman (2012), concerning how people construct meaning from life events, seem to apply. For example, in the way they illustrate how people develop ways of coping through finding meaning in ways which seem to apply to participants in the current study. This is particularly the case due to authors highlighting how people must strive to make sense of life events which

contradict previous notions of what makes life meaningful (Tedeschi, Calhoun, & Cann, 2009, as cited in Sommer, Baumeister & Stillman, 2012).

For a partner of a trans person this could relate to loss of a sexual identity and community reference after a partner's disclosure. This raises the question of how people regain this sense of meaning in these circumstances. According to Sommer, Baumeister & Stillman (2012) this is through the strategies of gaining a purpose and fostering a positive sense of self-worth. People can gain a sense of purpose by perceiving the things that they are currently doing as being connected to future outcomes, and they can gain a sense of positive self-worth by concluding that they are good people with desirable traits. Both of these strategies seem to relate to the partners of trans people (and the participants of this study). With regards to the former strategy partners often endure periods of uncomfortableness or make sacrifices at certain points in the transition journey but these are meaningful to them as they tend to believe that these sacrifices will lead to a happier future. This could explain why some participants in this study tended to treat certain up and coming stages of their partner's transition as road blocks to quickly get past. For example, Keith was happy to make certain sacrifices such as not buying a car, house or getting married in order to pay for his partner's transition. By sacrificing these things now he and his partner will enjoy them more at a later point. With regards to the latter strategy of confirming oneself as a good person, this could relate to the way that the participants tended to self-sacrifice and put their partner first, as this might be what they think constitutes being a good person and good partner. This could also be why partners can feel guilt at prioritising their own needs, if this is associated with the undesirable trait of selfishness. This seems to relate to Sam's experience

who, on the one hand seemed to want to be everything that his partner needed him to be, but in practice found this untenable.

With reference to how participants learn to cope with their feelings about their partner's transition, a consideration of Kierkegaard's (1843) concept 'leap of faith' or, more accurately, 'qualitative leap' is warranted. Kierkegaard (1813-1855) was a Danish philosopher, theologian and social critic, who is widely considered to be the first existential philosopher, or the father of existentialism (Swenson, 2000). Much of his philosophical work deals with the issues of how one lives as a "single individual", highlighting the importance of personal choice and commitment (Gardiner, 1969).

The concept of a 'leap of faith' relates to the partner of a trans person who is embarking on a journey of transition with their partner, because having the faith that one will be able to cope with such a journey is a leap into the unknown. The participants had to very much embrace the challenges associated with the transition process, with no guarantee over how this would affect them or their relationship.

However, they would have need to have had a belief in a positive enough outcome, otherwise they would not have trusted their decision making etprocess and believed that their efforts were worthwhile. This is particularly pertinent when considering the amount of intense change that can happen to someone within a relatively short amount of time going through the transition process with their partner. Therefore, the participants could be said to be rarely on familiar ground (as demonstrated in Simon's account of him feeling like he was walking on Jell-O).

5.5 Seeing Through a Broader Lens

This theme related to the way the participants' experiences of being in a trans relationship seemed to cause them to develop a broadening perspective in a variety of different areas, they had previously regarded with a much narrower focus. This was particularly connected to how they regarded gender, as a general concept and in relation to their own gender identity. Due to the participants no longer seeing others through a binary lens of being either strictly male or female, this allowed them to be more flexible with their own gender and transcend traditional male stereotypes. This spilled over into their views of gender roles in romantic relationships, challenging more traditional narratives that they had once subscribed to. This was perceived positively by the participants as it allowed them to express themselves romantically in ways that felt more authentic. This perspective also broadened to include who they might be romantically attracted to in the future, with an increased range of possibilities that was made possible by them seeing their sexual identity in a more flexible way.

From a personal point of view, I feel that my perspective was broadened through my relationship with a trans person, particularly my notions of masculinity and femininity. For example, I was surprised how quickly I took on board that my partner identified as female and the difference this made to the way I thought about them, even though they had not made any changes and therefore looked the same. This made me realise that gender is less related to physicality and changed how I view others in relation to their gender. The situation changed my understanding of gender identity

to the extent that I now class myself as having had sex with a woman, despite not being intimate with someone with female genitalia.

This general questioning of identity and the reframing of aspects that were previously taken for granted, allowing for new, broader perspectives to develop is something which is also represented in the literature. For example, Bischof (2011) in which the participants' (in this case wives) relationships caused them to re-evaluate their notions of love and intimacy. Additionally, Boyd (2007), in an autobiographical personal account, details how her relationship influenced a shift in her notions about womanhood and femininity. In particular, this broader perspective could be specifically facilitated by people's personal self-reflections and in their conversations with others. For example, Pratt and Bolland, (2018), illustrated by reference to one participant how a trans relationship may encourage a cisgender person to self-reflect upon their cisgender privilege which might make them more aware of social issues that other people go through: *"I've been a practicing gay male since fifteen and I sort of got that under control and sort of figured the narratives of how this worked, (...) but there's so much more so being a partner of a trans person has opened me up to"* (Caleb, pg: 1264). With regards to how conversations with others might also encourage a broadening perspective, Platt and Bolland (2018) highlighted how discussions about gender-related topics, which happened as a direct consequence of having a transgender partner, enabled partners' concepts of sexual intimacy, privilege and social justice to be greatly expanded.

With regard to participants in this study seeming to view their identity with a much broader lens as a result of their participation in a trans relationship, so too did the

participants in the study by Platt and Bolland (2018). Like the findings of the current study, this was accomplished by some participants choosing to identify with the broader label of queer. This seemed similar to Jacob's adoption of this label with regards to how it tied in with an appreciation of the diversity of sexuality and the realisation that people do not need to categorise themselves as prescriptively as they once believed. *"It's definitely opened my eyes to helping me understand myself better and what I'm attracted to and to not be putting myself in a box like I used to"* (Paige, pg: 1261).

This broadening perspective experienced by the participants could be in part be explained by the 'broaden-and-build theory' (Kok, Catalino & Fredrickson, 2008) of positive emotions, due to the majority of the participants currently feeling positive about their lives and relationship. This is because this theory argues that positive emotions broadened people's perspectives unlike negative emotions which narrowed people's perspectives. The theory argues that with this broadened perspective (fostered by positive emotions) people engage in a wider range of actions than what is typical for them, and a person's scope of attention becomes wider so that they notice more in the environment around them. Whereas a narrower perspective, fostered by negative emotions encourages someone to reject new experiences and stick to the 'safe and familiar'. This seems to relate to the participants in the study in the way that they seemed to broaden their social activities into new areas, and the way they noticed attributes in other people (the strength and compassion of LGBTQ people, the joy of a trans person they are unacquainted with becoming more liberated in their identity). This theory is mainly used to explain survival (of the species) from an evolutionary standpoint, due to both narrower and broader

mindsets being adaptive in certain ways. For example, in influencing how we react to threats to survival due to them mediating how we learn from experience.

However, with reference to this study, this could be related to how people respond to threats to the survival of their relationships, and their adaption to the new terrain that they may find themselves in as the partner of a trans person. This theory explains that the broad mindset associated with positive emotions is adaptive to survival as it can start a chain reaction which positively transforms people, leaving them more socially, psychologically and physically equipped (Kok, Catalino, Fredrickson, 2008). This very much seems to relate to the journey of the participants in the study, who all seemed to grow in these areas. This theory could be useful to explain why partners change their perspective at certain stages of the transition process and how this relates to their emotions and behaviour. For example, how the negative stages of emotion that are likely at the disclosure stage will influence them to have a narrower perspective at this time, but also how this perspective might broaden when they experience the positive emotions related to seeing their partner being happier in their own skin.

It could be argued that this broadened perspective was facilitated by the participants' general openness to exploring their own identity, and that the conditions were right for such an exploration to occur. This can be illustrated by the work of Grotevant (1987, as cited in Schwartz, 2001) who identified five antecedents to the exploration process. These are as follows: 'information-seeking tendency', 'the presence or absence of competing forces in one's life', 'satisfaction or dissatisfaction with one's current identity', 'expectations for the exploration process' and 'willingness to explore'. It seems that all five of these antecedents were present for all the participants in their efforts to negotiate their own identity within a situation with many

conflicting elements. For example, with regard to 'information-seeking tendency', all participants showed this to varying degrees, particularly David who seemed to fall back into a default scholar mode. All the participants displayed a willingness to explore, as evidenced in their interviews, even for the one participant whose relationship did not survive. All the participants could be said to have had competing forces in their lives – for example, the conflict between how their identity was viewed by others and how they defined it themselves. With relation to this they all seemed to be moving towards developing a more authentic identity that they were more satisfied with, this being motivated by their previous identity no longer complementing them. This process of adaptation was engaged in with the spirit of exploration and a thirst for knowledge, which seems undoubtedly related to the participants seeing themselves and the world through a broader lens.

5.6 Renegotiating Sexual Identity

This theme attempted to capture how much the participants renegotiated their sexual identity in response to their trans partner, and the ways they did this. Of the participants only one, David, did not seem to adjust his sexual identity in any way. However, for some (3 participants) this renegotiation involved them discovering an identity that was already there, repressed and unacknowledged, as opposed to forging a new identity to be deliberately more compatible to their partner. For others who did not uncover a repressed identity, this involved creatively adjusting their identity in various ways. For example, through beginning to identify as queer, as a way to transcend identity labels which no longer applied to them and their relationship, or through adjusting their existing concepts of sex and sexuality to make

them wider and more flexible. If participants chose the latter strategy it meant that they could keep their existing sexual identity label without invalidating their own or their partner's identity. However, as Sam's account showed, it is also possible that people can be left in a middle ground where they feel they are no longer able to identify with any specific identity label. This is at least partly due to language being insufficient to articulate the complexities of identities.

Exploring this theme has certainly opened my eyes to the creative ways with which one can remain or become compatible with their partner on a sexual identity level. As a gay male who is no longer in a relationship with a trans partner, my experience resonates most with Sam's in terms of being left in a no man's land of identity. I no longer feel as certain about using the label gay to describe myself, although I do not feel able describe myself as bisexual. On the one hand the accepted definition of the concept of being gay now feels too narrow to me, on the other the term bisexual feels inaccurate as the consideration of this term was only based on one experience that is no longer happening. In addition to this, I would personally feel worried about how someone who considered themselves to be bisexual would react to me considering myself in this way, in that they may not take me seriously or could actually be offended. It is difficult not to ponder what might have happened in this area if my relationship had continued for longer and my partner had progressed further with transition.

These findings seem to contrast with the literature (on mainly female partners) in a number of ways. In the literature there seems to be no accounts of partners uncovering an identity that was already there and previously repressed; instead, it

seems that partners' 'original' identities were renegotiated or shifted. An example of this is research by Joslin-Roher & Wheeler (2009), where the majority of the participants changed their identity from lesbian to queer. This renegotiating of identity is illustrated by a quote of a participant from a study by Forde (2009), "*I saw myself as straight before, then when P transitioned, I saw myself as a reluctant lesbian, now shifted to an accidental lesbian*" (interviewee 1, pg: 1496). This does not seem to suggest an uncovering of identity but a deliberate renegotiation. However it is hard to tell from the literature the exact motivation behind someone changing their identity label. This uncovering of identity could have happened for some of the participants, in the current study particularly, due to those particular participants coming from conservative backgrounds which influenced them to repress their identity, as opposed to this being a common experience for all male partners. What seems to be in common with the literature is the tendency for partners to at least question their sexuality (even if they do not change the label they use to describe it) due to all but one of the participants in this study doing this. ..This is similar to the findings of Joslin-Roher & Wheeler (2009), Bischof et al (2011) and Platt and Boland (2018) in which in the vast majority of cases the participants' relationships provoked an exploration of their own identity. This involved them exploring how flexibly they could regard their sexual identity and sexuality itself to allow them freedom from the labels they had used to define themselves. For example, in Platt and Bolland's (2018) one participant, Mathew, described how he had transcended the label of gay, (in a similar way to a participant in this study, Sam) due to embracing the idea of being in a relationship with a woman.

In the literature, for example studies by Bischof et al (2011), Tompkins (2011), Brown (2009) and Platt and Bolland (2018) queer was an identity label that was often adopted by participants to allow them increased fluidity in order to escape the more rigid confines of other labels, which no longer described them or their relationship. This adoption of queer was seen as a factor which helped participants have the flexibility to adjust to their changing relationship and to describe their relationship to others. While two of the participants in this study adopted the term queer after their partner's disclosure, they seemed to have different reasons for doing so. For Keith the use of 'queer' helped him to claim his attractions to cisgender women, trans masculine, trans feminine and intersex people, as queer most accurately described these attractions. For Jacob this seemed to be more in line with the experiences represented in the literature whereby queer is adopted as a way to occupy a grey area, which allowed him to continue to be attracted to his female partner, while not choosing to identify as bisexual or straight.

Sam's experiences of feeling left in a middle ground, with no easy way to explain his identity to himself or others, seems to relate directly to Boyd (2007). This is in terms of no longer feeling that that she could adhere to the category of heterosexual (as a straight woman) yet not feeling homosexual either, hence left in a no man's land of identity. However for Sam, as gay man, this was reversed due to him no longer feeling that he could describe himself as gay, yet heterosexual not being accurate either. This helps to suggest that both men and women, and people who are straight or gay can end up occupying a grey area of identity that cannot be described adequately by language. What differs is their ability to happily do this.

These findings seem to partly challenge research which indicates that female sexuality is inherently more fluid than males such as claimed by Baumeister, (2000). For example, the idea that this lack of fluidity means that males are less likely to define their sexual identity in non-exclusive terms, such as queer (Savin-Williams, Joyner & Rieger, 2012). The accounts of male participants also contradict the idea that male sexuality is more centred around physical factors, than sociocultural factors as claimed by Baumeister, (2000). This is due to the degree that some of the male participants transcended the physical to realise that there was much more to sexuality than this.

This fluidity of sexual identity relates to Queer Theory, which challenges the notion of fixed identities, such as those implied by the sexual orientation labels of heterosexual, bisexual or homosexual, instead identities are in a constant state of flux (Langdrige, 2007, as cited in Spinelli, 2014). The participants' use of the word queer, particularly by Jacob who described a way for him to flexibly respond to his current situation and surrender his anxieties about the future, seems to be what is proposed by queer theory. For example, Jagose (1996) who writes: *'queer is a way of pointing ahead without knowing for certain what to point at (...) rather, it describes a horizon of possibility whose precise extent and heterogeneous scope cannot in principle be delimited in advance'* (cited in Spinelli, 2014).

From a broader existential perspective it seems that it is not possible to ever really know whether someone has discovered a 'new' identity or simply re-negotiated a

current one, due to people's selves being in a constant state of flux, so it is questionable whether there is an 'original' starting identity in the first place (Van Deurzen & Adams, 2016). However, it is perhaps people's perception of their identity adaptation, rather than the reality of it, which is of importance. What the participants could be describing is their identity sedimentations, or in other words *"novel 'self-assemblies' that are (...) influenced by the 'interweaving of events at a given moment'"* (Thelen, 2005: p 271, cited in Spinelli 2014) which are produced by the unusual situation of being a partner of a trans person. Spinelli (1994) theorised that all aspects of identity were constantly liable to change so therefore can be viewed as sedimentations. Identity sedimentations in the context of this research refer to beliefs that the participants had developed about their sexual identity which they had previously strived to maintain due to how invested they were in them until these beliefs needed to be abandoned for new ones. This concept is similar to that of a paradigm shift described by Kuhn (1962), who posited that when there is too much evidence present which contradicts the foundations of a belief it is at this point when it is changed. Therefore, from this perspective, the participants' 'previous' identities were mere sedimentations, abandoned in a continual process of identity formation.

While all the participants had embarked on some process of identity exploration, all bar one (Sam, who described currently being in a kind of no man's land of identity) seemed satisfied with their current identity, whether they considered this 'discovered' or negotiated in response to their relationship. They therefore did not seem to be actively exploring and adjusting their identity but, rather, concentrating on explaining and justifying their identity to others (myself included). In terms of hearing these descriptions, it can be argued that it is important not to focus narrowly on the labels

that people use to describe themselves without exploring what these labels mean for the individuals involved. This is due to the tendency for people to assume that sexual identity labels such as gay or straight have some kind of unified meaning, whereas in reality they can mean many different things, and people can use them for many different reasons (Spinelli, 1996).

5.7 Embracing the benefits

This theme focused on the benefits that participants perceived they gained as a result of their relationship. The theme was called 'embracing' the benefits as it seemed that partners actively choose to see certain aspects of their relationship as positive. Often these positive aspects seemed to have been developed through adversity, suggesting that at an earlier point in time they could have been considered challenges. These specific benefits included increased insight and self-development, a greater sense of freedom of expression and increased relationship closeness. These all seemed to be related to the participants experiencing a lot of change in a relatively short period of time. While successfully ensuring any type of sustained adversity might have resulted in certain types of benefits, what seemed unique to being in a trans relationship was the specific form that these benefits took. For example, the increased sense of freedom participants experienced related to their gender expression. This was due to their specific experience helping them to transcend traditional male roles and stereotypes to express their identity more authentically.

When participants described what they experienced, I occasionally felt a sense of jealousy because I did not experience many of these aspects in my relationship. This was partly because my relationship was not functioning well enough in terms of communication to foster the positive aspects of the situation, and partly because it did not reach certain transition 'milestones' which represented opportunities for growth. Additionally, unlike some of the participants, I did not feel like I needed to get away from things such as a conservative upbringing or the effects of toxic masculinity. However, what I did gain was an increase in self-awareness and a thirst to research this topic, which is beneficial for me and potentially beneficial for others.

In terms of the wider literature these findings particularly relate to Platt and Bolland (2018), whose findings seemed to be the most similar to this study in relation to the benefits experienced by the participants. This is due to participants in Platt and Bolland's study also experiencing a greater sense of freedom in their own gender expression and in particular aspects of their gender role. For some of the participants gender roles were simplified and clarified and therefore open to less ambiguity, as illustrated by one participant. *"I felt like there were too many damn roles, now it kind of like works out better because I can take on the role of protector and leader (Jordon, pg: 1264).* While this was not expressed in this way by any of the participants in the current study, it helps to show how a greater sense of role authenticity can have many potential benefits, such as an increased sense of clarity and purpose which might be obscured by subscribing to more societally imposed stereotypes. However it is important to recognise that transcending the stereotypes

associated with one's own gender might not always be a benefit, as shown by the study of Bischof et al, (2011), in which wives felt that they needed to take on roles more associated with traditional male stereotypes, due to their partner's transition. This suggests that in this case, these partners were becoming more entrenched in stereotypes as opposed to being freed from them.

Similarly to the findings of the current study, which stressed the benefits of increased self-insight and self-development that participants experienced, was research by Platt and Bolland (2018). Some of the participants in the Platt and Bolland (2018) study commented on the extent to which their relationship had been an unexpected learning experience for them, a learning experience that some participants retrospectively wondered why they had not begun before. Similar to how the current study illustrated (with reference to Jacob's experience) the benefits associated with withstanding the discomfort of awkward conversations with a transgender partner, Platt and Bolland (2018) also reported similar benefits associated with increased communication. However, in this research these benefits were also associated with conversations with a person's wider social circle, such as common place discussions about gender related topics with family, friends and colleagues, which happened as a direct consequence of having a transgender partner. This relates not just to the benefits associated with being able to broach difficult and controversial topics with people, but also to the benefits associated with increased knowledge and self-development.

Although academic literature does not seem to stress the benefits that partners of trans people experience, other than Platt and Bolland (2018), with reference to the non-academic literature many parallels can be drawn to the current research. For example, in relation to partners experiencing greater gender flexibility and embracing a more flexible identity, Boyd (2007) elaborated upon how her relationship helped her to reclaim an old tom boy identity, which she had felt forced to abandon after puberty. This seems similar in certain ways to what Sam experienced where his relationship helped him to reclaim a masculine identity that he had repressed. In both of these examples this seemed to be made possible by the increased femininity of expression by their respective partners and helps to suggest that this phenomenon can be relevant irrespective of what gender someone is.

The experience of Cantons (2012) relates to the idea that going through adversity can come with certain benefits. In this autobiographical personal account she depicts herself as being the worst possible person to end up in the situation of having a trans partner, due to it tapping into so many of her personal challenges, for example her typical need to explain herself to others and the violation of privacy that being with a trans partner naturally involves (due to people's general curiosity about trans issues). However, through being exposed to these challenges she learned to care less about what others thought of her and therefore was freer to develop a more authentic identity.

It is useful to bring in a wider perspective on relationships as informed by Social Exchange Theory (Thibaut & Kelley, 1959), in order to contextualise the relational

dynamics which may be present in trans relationships. This theory attempts to explain how relationships function by stressing the amount of benefits that are required to be perceived by partners in order to allow them to believe their relationships are worth maintaining. In other words relationships work best when no one is significantly over-benefiting or under-benefiting (Sprecher, 1992, as cited in Lui 2012). Therefore, while it may be tempting to assume that the cisgender partner will end up assuming the position of under-benefiter in a trans relationship, this seems unlikely as they are unlikely to stay in a relationship that does not benefit them in some way. This relates to the participants in this study in terms of the benefits they gained from their participation in their relationship, for example, self-gratification for being a good supportive partner, or increased self-development. Therefore, these secondary gains might mean that their actions were not only motivated by their care for their partner. It also explains why participants seemed to view certain aspects, which could have been seen as challenges, as benefits in order to justify staying. According to social exchange theory they may have had to perceive these aspects as benefits. This suggests that participating in a trans relationships, as in any type of relationship, there will be benefits gained, and it is not clear why other research has not focused more on these.

The reaping of unexpected benefits through adversity also relates to disability research, looking at people partnered with people who have become disabled. While being trans is by no means a disability or similar in any way to being disabled, with reference to this type of research an alternative broader perspective can be brought in. This is due to the parallels that exist in the experiences of the partners of trans people and the partners of people with certain disabilities. With this in mind, the findings of this type of research can be applied to a broader range of people in a

variety of different situations, such as the partners of people with acquiring hearing or sight loss or those with traumatic brain injury. Any experience which significantly changes the life of one person in a relationship will invariably demand the adaptation of the partner, thereby fundamentally changing the way of being in the relationship. Godwin and Kreutzer (2014) showed how the daily and overarching challenges experienced by the partners of people with traumatic brain injury, gave participants increased ability to withstand uncertainty, more effective coping mechanisms and enabled their marriage to develop a stronger foundation. It seems that people are not easily able to envisage what it would be like if their partner suddenly came out as trans, whereas it is easier for people to imagine what it would be like if their partner were to become disabled. In fact, two of the participants in this study used this type of analogy to explain their situation to others (Jacob and Murray). Therefore, this reinforces the idea that the use of analogies can aid understanding by people who are not directly affected by this issue.

The topic of embracing benefits prompted a consideration of Nietzsche's (1889) most famously repeated idea that 'what does not kill you makes you stronger'. Nietzsche, a German philosopher influenced by Darwinism, saw people as being moulded by the laws of evolution, constantly shaped by environmental forces, such as education and culture (Richardson, 2004). He therefore advocated the notion that people are in a constant state of becoming with regard to adapting to be more suited to the environment in which they live. Experiences which do not kill us enable us to grow and adapt (Knoll, 2014). It is argued by Seery (2011) that this is due to these

difficult experiences providing an opportunity for people to develop an increased capacity to cope with subsequent hardship, making people more adaptive to their circumstances. This is, however, only if a person experiences the 'right' amount of adversity from an experience that is neither too mild to cause profound change or from one that is overly traumatic which could cause lasting harm (Seery, 2011). It seems that being a partner of a trans person (at least one who successfully negotiates the challenges associated with this) involves the right amount of adversity to provide the context for character development and increased coping skills, without being traumatic enough to give someone long lasting anguish, or particular psychological vulnerabilities. (Seery, 2011). This relates to the idea of 'post-traumatic growth' (Lepore & Ravenson, 2006) which refers to a specific type of resilience that people develop where they learn to prosper after being exposed to adversity. Whereas the term resilience usually refers to a recovery where a person returns to their previous baseline, post-traumatic growth involves positive changes which continue into the future (Lepore & Ravenson, 2006). Various aspects of the process of being in a relationship with a trans person can be potentially traumatic, in that it may overwhelm a person's coping resources – for example, following the initial disclosure of a trans person to their partner. Additionally, certain factors could make this process worse and thus potentially more traumatic. For example, being unable to access support from friends and family when the trans partner is not ready to disclose to others. However, if people combat their feelings of isolation by seeking union with people with similar experiences, for example on online communities, this can create opportunities for psychological growth. This seemed to be the case for many of the participants who spoke about utilising online communities, such as Jacob, David and Eric who initially described feeling very isolated until they

discovered people with similar experiences. This was undoubtedly connected to their overall journey towards increased self-development and authenticity. It is important to note that the positive outcomes demonstrated by the participants in this research are not likely to be the case for everyone having this experience. This is highlighted by Hartwell-Walker (2019) who adapted Nietzsche's original idea to 'what does not kill you makes you *different*', indicating that experiencing adversity that results in a positive outcome depends on the individual. It is certainly the case that experiencing adversity which seriously challenges a person will inevitably leave that person different in some way. The specific manner in which someone changes depends on a myriad of individual differences.

Indeed according to Nietzsche's (1883) concept of 'Übermensch' life should not be comfortable but rather it should be about challenging ourselves to be the best version of ourselves. This seems to be what has happened for the participants in this study, as well as for the participants in other studies, through reaping the benefits associated with being pushed outside of their comfort zone. For example, being more open minded, less judgmental of others and more resilient. The notion of gaining benefits from going outside one's comfort zone is an idea that is also supported in contemporary literature – for example, in the realm of self-help/self-development. For instance, Warrell (2020) in her book '*You've Got This! The Life-Changing Power of Trusting Yourself*' states: "In an increasingly competitive, cautious and accelerated world, those who are willing to take risks, step out of their comfort zone and into the discomfort of uncertainty will be those who will reap the biggest rewards" (p. 6).

5.8: Societal influence

This theme refers to the extent to which society and culture potentially influenced participants' experiences. This can be deemed as relevant from an identity perspective as identity formation can be viewed as a joint process that occurs between individuals and their social and cultural environments (Kurtines, 1999 as cited in Schwartz, 2001). All participants were from a western culture with the majority of them being from America, from a number of different states. It is important to highlight the diversity between different states in America in terms of their level of conservatism, progressivism and the laws that they have in place to protect against discrimination, as this could colour experience. This is especially relevant due to some participants coming from particularly progressive states, such as California and New York, and others coming from far less progressive ones, such as Michigan and Virginia. However, these differences were not illustrated in the findings, as the participants did not comment on how their experience was influenced by the particular state in which they lived, therefore it was difficult to ascertain how much of an impact this had. For some participants, such as Eric and Philip (who were from the more liberal state of California), it seemed that they were more influenced by their individual conservative family backgrounds as opposed to the wider culture of the state that they were living in. In general, the participants seemed more affected by the overall political situation of America as a whole and the potential impact this might have on their long-term future, which could be said to transcend state lines. While some were less aware than others about the influence that culture had on their daily lives, it seems that the current cultural climate had the

potential to cause both a negative and positive impact. The increased awareness of trans people and trans issues in society was thought of as a 'double edged sword'. On one hand certain conversation and debates are now possible, but this increased awareness has led to the topic becoming politicised and more controversial, which can lead to people fearing discrimination. Often this fear of discrimination is about perceived potential discrimination in particular future situations/scenarios, as opposed to being based on someone's past experience of actual discrimination. This can result in people feeling that they are half in and half out the closet due to them being vigilant about who they disclose the nature of their relationship to. However due to transgender issues being much more out in the open this might mean that it is easier for a trans person to find a way to broach the subject with their partner (as was the case of one participant, Jacob). Therefore, this means that culture can act as a catalyst for the whole journey of the cisgender partner. From personal experience this is something to which I can relate to some degree, as my partner (friend at that point) disclosed to me that they were trans when we were on holiday abroad together, so it did not feel as if our culture had allowed this to happen, but the escape from our culture and everyday lives had. Therefore, it was possible that my partner disclosed this whilst they were in a different environment/culture so if it had gone badly, from my partner's perspective, they would be more able to ignore that it had happened when 'returning to reality'.

These findings suggest the prominence of concern of discrimination, which is also highlighted in research by Pratt and Bolland (2018) and Bischof et. al (2007). In the former study actual or perceived discrimination was a concern for the majority of participants, and in the latter it was one of the first things that a partner thought about

when the initial shock of disclosure had worn off. Similar to the findings of the current study, which suggests how vigilant partners might be in choosing who to reveal their relationship status to, Theron & Collier (2013) highlighted the ways that partners feel the need to pre-empt discrimination before it happens, thus avoiding scenarios which they perceive to be 'too high risk'. Therefore, this seems to be a phenomenon which impacts people's daily lives to a great extent.

The findings of this study concur with that of the literature with regards to the idea that a greater perception of the risk of discrimination is related to a greater awareness of how culture affects trans issues. Pratt and Bolland (2018) for example illustrated how partners had a heightened awareness of widespread incidences of violence which had happened to trans people, and an awareness of how gender appearance is policed and judged in public. This meant that they were greatly concerned about the physical safety of their partners and due to this judged where to go and what social plans to choose, based on perceived level of acceptance. The extent that their partners may experience this potential discrimination is illustrated by Abrahams (2015): "*I can act as ambassador for the country of our relationship as the soldiers advance*" (pg: 78), which suggests that the potential threat is always looming.

The findings of this study did not reveal participants experiencing actual discrimination, as none of them highlighted this. However this is unfortunately not the case in the wider literature, with wide spread actual discrimination appearing to be common within LGBTQ communities. For instance, in the study by Platt and Bolland (2018) participants felt actively rejected and invalidated by LGBTQ

communities, to the extent which they felt their voices were silenced by community members. However this seemed to be predominately the case for sexual minority (lesbian) partners, not straight people. This is may be because straight people did not have a previous level of experience to compare their current one with, due to only entering these communities after their relationship began. This can help to explain the differences in findings between Platt and Bolland, (2018) and the current study, which did not include as many sexual minority participants.

From an existential perspective it can be said that human beings are reliant on culture to inform them how to be and act in the world, and thus it provides a 'roadmap' for living. This therefore provides people with certainty and counteracts the anxiety and fear inherent in being alive (Salzman, 2008). However for the partners of trans people, culture gives no such roadmap and they must negotiate their own path through a culture that increases their anxiety and fear, as opposed to one that mitigates it. The idea of perceived discrimination affecting someone more than actual discrimination seems to relate to Sartre's (1943) concept of the 'look'. If people perceive they are being discriminated through the eyes of society, they will feel objectified and this will influence how they feel about themselves and how they act.

5.9 Summary of Discussion

In summary, it can be said that these themes represent some of the idiosyncratic and universal aspects of a cisgender partner's experience in a trans relationship. Themes such as 'context dependent sense of loss', 'making sense' and 'finding a

way to cope', elaborated on the ways the individual participant coped or made sense of their experience, which was dependent on their unique set of circumstances and the nature of their relationship, for example, in terms of 'context dependent sense of loss', the nature of their relationship, their identity and their unique life circumstances dictated the parameters of what could be lost or gained. Whereas other themes such a 'seeing through a broader lens' and 'embracing the benefits' seemed to be themes that unified the participants' experience as partners of trans people, due to them suggesting generalities about this experience, for example, seeing themselves and others in a more expansive way, and experiencing benefits such as a more authentic sense of identity. While some of these themes seem to naturally directly relate to identity (the main topic of this thesis) more than others, due to the broad definition of identity that is employed in which identity is seen as having psychological, physical, social and spiritual aspects, all the themes relate to this topic in some way, for example, 'finding a way to cope' involved some of the participants falling back into default coping mechanisms or in other words into familiar identities of care giver or scholar. This theme also conversely involved other participants having to change their default ways of being when these no longer served them, for example relinquishing a type A personality due to feeling less able to plan for the future. 'Cultural influence' also related to the topic of identity due to some of the participants fearing how changes in culture may threaten their new found identities, identities which they can no longer choose to hide due to visibility of their trans partner. Reflecting from a personal experience has allowed me to realise how many of these aspects I did not experience either due to my relationship not reaching certain transition 'milestones' or due to my relationship being less stable than the participants' seemed to be. Initially, I experienced some envy with regard to this,

especially where participants were describing the benefits that they had experienced. However, with time I was able to accept that due to the nature of my relationship (which could be described as dysfunctional) I was not in a position to have ever received these.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

6.1 Summary

This study aims to contribute to an understanding of the experience of male partners of trans people by exploring their lived world and their perception of the influence that their partner's transition has upon them. To achieve this aim, nine male partners were interviewed who elaborated on their experience. These were males who affiliated with different sexual identity labels and were partnered with differently identifying trans people, who were at differing stages of the transition process. The trans relationship could be current or in the past, however only one participant's relationship was not current at the time of the interviews. These broad criteria allowed the effective recruitment of participants and for a broad range of experiences to be explored.

The literature review revealed that despite contemporary research focusing more on trans partnerships, there is much potential for further exploration. This is especially the case for male partners due to their lack of representation in the literature and due to there being no known studies which feature solely male participants. This meant that the literature review had to, by necessity, predominately focus on female partners' experiences. Both academic and non-academic sources (blogs, biographical book chapters) were utilised to reveal a diverse range of themes related to trans partners' experiences. These themes mainly related to a partner's psychological, relational and social adjustment to their partner's transition process. The combined process of managing these interrelated processes was often described as the partner having their own transition, in parallel to that of the trans partner. This helped to show how powerfully this was experienced by partners. With

regards to identity as the main theme, the review illustrated the complex and creative ways that people adjusted their identity in relation to their partner. This could be in a number of ways, for example, changing their identity label to better describe their status as a partner of a trans person and in order not to invalidate their partner's identity.

IPA was concluded to be the best approach to use for this study. Other methods such as DPA and the heuristic approach could have been used and were considered at the initial research stages. However, none of these approaches matched the goals of the research or the epistemological standpoint of the researcher as well as IPA. The main goal of the research was to investigate the lived world of the participants by exploring their interpretation of their experience, and in doing so provide a voice for a hidden minority group in society. It was assumed from the outset that the sample group would include people with unique experiences (due to the diversity of partners' experiences in the literature), hence partners' accounts would display a high level of idiosyncrasy. IPA as a technique can utilise idiosyncratic information to allow for individual voices to be heard. I as the researcher wanted to pay tribute to the participants' experiences as opposed to my own personal experience, which was why the heuristic approach was not chosen. My epistemological stance ruled out DPA as I adhere to the belief that we are fundamentally interpretive by nature, and therefore cannot exclude this from our analysis of people or situations. Therefore, the findings represent a double interpretation; an interpretation from the participants of their own experience and an interpretation by myself as the researcher of that reported experience.

The findings suggest that male partners' experience is comparable to female partners' perspectives (as represented in the literature) in a number of ways, for

example, the experience of complex grief that a partner might go through after a trans partner's disclosure and at various points in the transition process. There is also similarity in the benefits that partners may experience, for example an increasing feeling of freedom within their identity and a feeling of getting closer to who they wanted to be. While the male participants in this study did demonstrate some aspects of a renegotiation of identity, this did not seem to be to the same degree as female participants in the literature (if this is based on an actual change of sexual identity label). It seemed that participants who did change their sexual identity label did so because they discovered that, through their trans relationship, they had been repressing this identity. However, it is not known the extent to which this is representative of male partners as a whole, or was unique to this particular sample, due to there being so many ways that a person can adapt their identity in relation to their partner. Indeed, the males in the study can still be said to have displayed sexual fluidity, whereas traditionally research has suggested that male sexuality is rather inflexible. However, sexual fluidity can be defined in a number of ways and does not only relate to someone radically changing their sexual preferences or their sexual identity label.

Many of the differences that were found seemed to be explicitly related to the participants' gender. For example, participants reported taking a broader perspective on gender, in terms of how they expressed gender as well as how it can be expressed in society. This gave them increased freedom from more traditional male stereotypes and allowed them more authenticity of expression. The results suggest that experiencing a trans partner's transition, as a romantic partner, might not be as challenging as assumed due to participants emphasising the positive aspects of this experience. However, it was surmised that participants could be

downplaying the personal challenges due to how partner- focused they appeared to be. In addition to this, they may tend to underestimate the negatives as a way of justifying their decision to stay with their partner.

A key finding of this study was an elaboration of the specific coping strategies that were employed by the participants to deal with their partner's transition, which could be applicable to other cisgender partners of trans people. This is particularly significant due to other research in the trans partnership field failing to uncover this. It is surmised that partners previously may not have elaborated on their specific coping strategies, due to this information being hard for them to consciously access. This is due to them simply dealing with each situation that arises, prioritising their partner's needs each time. Thus they may have less opportunity to reflect about how they are catering to their own needs.

6.2 Significance and implications

This study is significant for a number of reasons, particularly due to its diverse range of implications. On a cultural level it helps to illustrate that a shift may have happened whereby minority groups are more officially protected and visible, yet due to this feel more vulnerable to discrimination. It therefore helps to highlight how powerful 'perceived potential discrimination' is in terms of its influence on people. While none of the participants mentioned actively being discriminated against, the risk of this seemed to greatly affect some of their lives.

Due to the cisgender partner sometimes taking a caring role, this strengthens the case for them to receive the same acknowledgement that other carers receive. This

is particularly relevant due to the growth of services dedicated to supporting carers, and the greater acknowledgement of their role and importance in society (Barker, 2016).

The findings of the study help to show that partners of trans people may go through a similar yet distinct process that other groups who experience complex grief progress through. Nonetheless, a partner of a trans person might not get the same recognition for this as a partner of someone who becomes severely disabled, for example. This point is made not to suggest that a person who is trans is similar in any way to someone who has a disability, but to stress that the experience of grief for partners, in these two very divergent situations, may have many important similarities. However, while it can be argued that both experiences are equally valid and deserve recognition, a trans partner may be less visible than the partner of a disabled person, due to the trans person themselves being less visible – for instance, when not yet presenting as their identified gender.

This study has obvious implications for LGBT support services and communities, due to emphasising the unique needs of partners of trans people and therefore the development of provisions to cater to this need. This is in the context of the majority of LGBT centres in the country not having specific support groups for partners of trans people. This pertinence of LGBT support services being more inclusive to partners is also stressed by the findings of Platt and Bolland (2018) which highlight the extent to which partners of trans people, particularly those identifying as a sexual minority, do not feel welcome within the LGBT community.

This thesis has various implications for counselling psychology in the way that it highlights the needs of male participants, which helps to specify them as a

population that may need special attention from counsellors and psychotherapists. For example, they may need support to explore their understanding of their gender and identity, and to apply this to their lives. Many of the participants in this study had accessed therapy before and during their partner's disclosure, and it seems that in these cases this helped to explain why they had adjusted so well to their partners' transition. This suggests the importance of therapy for male cisgender partners of trans people. This is particularly the case due to certain tendencies that the participants seemed to share, for example, putting their partner's needs before their own, and feeling that they need to show their partner that they are happy or excited about transition related changes. This seems to suggest that certain feelings could remain unprocessed, and psychotherapy could provide a space for this. It seems that male partners may be more in need of therapeutic support due to males accessing support groups less frequently than females. This is supported by a lack of representation of male partners in on-line communities for partners of trans people. This study helps to show that while this group is small and hidden, it does exist and has unique needs.

This study can help to challenge some assumptions that might exist in the counselling psychology field. For example, adapting to a loved one being transgender is an inherently difficult/challenging process for the partner concerned, which is largely detrimental to their mental health. Furthermore, this study can also challenge assumptions regarding what part of the transition journey is the most difficult for the partner. By emphasising how individual and context dependent this experience was for partners it is hoped that this research can in some way lessen the tendency for people to make generalisations about this experience. It is also hoped that by showing the complex and creative ways that partners adapt to their

partner's transition, that moves the focus to the non-transitioning partner and shows that as a group they are worthy of attention. This is especially important due to trans partners' experiences tending to being foreshadowed by the fascination that people tend to show towards trans people themselves.

This study is of particular significance to existential counselling psychology as it helps to illustrate the extent to which people can move beyond their sedimentations (of identity) to embrace an identity that feels more authentic in the here and now. While male sexuality has been deemed less flexible than female, this does not mean that men cannot move beyond the labels they create for themselves, or change the way they see sex and sexuality, even if this means they do not change the actual label they use.

6.3 Strengths, Limitations and Challenges

The main strength of this study was its success at recruiting entirely male participants, which has not been done before as males made up only the minority of participant groups in other studies, if included at all. It was known during the recruitment process how difficult other researchers, in this field, had found it to recruit male participants. However, if the research had opened the criteria up to include women, it would have sacrificed of the uniqueness of the research and the voice of male partners. This means that this research, through its utilisation of IPA, provides rich detailed accounts of the male partners' lived experience, where people are seen as individuals with unique concerns. Due to this, this research elaborates upon a very complex phenomenon with distinct but highly interrelated aspects, in a way that larger quantitative studies cannot. The diverse accounts of the participants

show how dependent this experience is on context, and demonstrates the creativity that can be displayed by partners in their adaptation to an ever changing set of circumstances.

However, while recruiting male participants was the study's greatest strength, it was also its greatest challenge, which relates to some of the limitations of the study. For example, due to the difficulty of finding male participants because of their apparent lack of numbers or visibility, the original inclusion criteria of the study was broadened to include all male partners. This meant that the resulting data set was less homogenous, and was comprised of people with very different experiences with only their gender and their experience of trans relationships as a common factor. This also meant that participants differed in a variety of demographic ways, for example the age of the youngest participant was 18 and the oldest 72. Due to this it was harder to compare across cases and find themes universal to all participants. However, what the research did do was demonstrate how unique and context dependent these experiences were.

This research only managed to include one person who had been in a trans relationship that had ended. It was considered it important to try to include people with this experience due to other research focusing on current relationships only, however it was impossible to tell beforehand which 'type' of partners would respond to the research advertisement. It is hypothesised that ex partners are less likely to want to talk about their experience due to wishing to put it behind them, and no longer seeking support from online communities, from which the sample was mostly drawn. It was noticed that only current partners tended to have an online presence. However, it is hoped that this one case has illustrated the long-term effects that this

experience can have on someone's worldview and identity, even after the relationship has ended.

The use of online communities and forums as a recruitment tool as also a challenge and limitation. This resulted in a predominantly non-British sample due to the internet being worldwide, and due to the scarcity of male partners, participants who fitted the inclusion criteria could not be excluded on this basis. It seemed that Americans had the biggest presence online, which resulted in a predominantly American sample being utilised for this study. It did not seem possible to recruit a large enough sample of British male partners, as when I contacted British based support organisations I was informed that they had no male partners registered. With regards to having a predominantly American sample, it is hoped that as a western culture and due to the increasing global impact of politics and culture that the results may still be generalisable to a UK population. The utilisation of a non-British sample also meant, by necessity, that the participants had to be interviewed via Skype. This could have influenced the ability of the participant and myself as the researcher to establish rapport and meant that the more sensitive aspects of their experience were not elaborated upon. Despite this, it is considered that the participants did still elaborate on the complexity of their experience, and it goes further than other studies that used other means such as Messenger (Forde, 2009).

Another limitation of the study is related to the ethical conditions which required participants to have received the disclosure from their partner at least six months prior to participating. While the rationale for this is justified, it means that this experience was not able to be captured while participants were still processing it. This meant that this experience was reflected upon by the participants in retrospect. This could make a significant difference to the nature of what was recalled and

emphasised about the experience. The research on relationships by Rosenblatt and Weiling (2013) also highlights this issue, as they found that couples often change what they make of the past in the light of new experiences. The ethical constraint of only interviewing participants six months post disclosure also made it more difficult to find participants as people may be more likely to talk about their experience around the point of disclosure, to process it and gain clarity. This ethical time constraint also makes the assumption that from an ethical point of view, the most challenging part of the process for the partner is the initial disclosure from their partner that they are trans, and not acknowledging that other aspects of this process may be equally difficult or more so. This research suggests that it was not so much the initial disclosure that participants found difficult, but future impeding stages such as hormone therapy.

A further challenge related to the difficulty with recruiting participants was the lack of support and assistance from trans support agencies. Some agencies that were contacted seemed openly hostile to the idea of the focus of the research being on the partners of trans people, as opposed to the trans people themselves. What seemed to underlie this was the belief that this distracted from the hardships that trans people experience, and seemed to portray the partners of trans people as victims due to this research suggesting that partners might experience challenges to their identity. Often, support agencies did not understand the need for a specific focus on male partners and seemed to have their own agendas on how they wished trans issues to be researched. Other challenges came in the form of trans people themselves, as on at least one occasion a partner was initially willing to participate but then said they had to withdraw due to their trans partner not being happy about

them being interviewed about their experience independently of them. This too seemed to stem from a belief that the trans person should be the main focus of studies. However, on one occasion the reverse of this occurred when a trans person recommended that their partner take part, but their partner declined. These challenges seem to stem from the current political and cultural climate which is very focused on trans rights, and is very cautious about anything that may be deemed as discrimination.

Whilst it is believed that IPA was the correct choice for use in this project due to its ability to give voice to people from hidden populations, other methodologies such as critical narrative analysis could have been used and may have influenced the focus of the research and subsequent findings in different ways. A possible limitation of using IPA is the requirement for the participants to recount and reflect upon their own experience from memory, as during the interviews they differed in their ability to be reflective. This particularly seemed to be the case with this participant group due to the majority of participants deciding to stay in their relationship, which entailed them justifying their reasons for staying and minimising their other options. In other words, it seemed that when they made their decision to stay, they to some extent 'just got on with it', not wanting to reflect on alternative options. This lack of reflection and introspection may have influenced the data.

6.4 Ideas for future research

This research has helped highlight several areas for future inquiry that go beyond the scope of this project. It would be useful to conduct larger scale studies with a greater number of participants. This would allow more comparisons between cases, for example, comparisons between gay identifying, straight identifying and queer male partners to explore more thoroughly how this affects their journey. It seems that this might be an easier way of exploring this than conducting individual studies on these groups due to the difficulty of recruiting male participants.

While this research only focused on partners who did not knowingly enter a relationship with a trans person, it would be of interest for future studies to compare and contrast people who enter trans relationships knowingly and those who do so unknowingly. It would be informative to explore how these two groups experience issues such as bereavement and the lens through which partners view their relationship. While partners who entered the relationship knowingly might be said to have made a more informed decision, it could be argued that no one can really know what we are 'signing up for' in a relationship, and therefore this could still involve loss. Indeed, this was my experience as a partner of a trans person who had entered the relationship post-disclosure. Due to this study only managing to include one participant whose relationship had ended, this made this case stand out in comparison to the others, which made it difficult to find commonalities in some regards. Therefore, future studies could look to include more of these participants to

compare them against people who are currently in trans relationships. This might allow a more thorough investigation into the reasons why people stay or leave trans relationships. It would also help to explore whether these people left due to trans related issues or due to issues that they believe are unrelated to this.

Due to this study interviewing participants at one particular moment in time, which could be at any stage of their partner's transition, this meant that their accounts could have been much different if interviewed at another time. This means that this study relies on participants' memories of various events, and does not follow the participant in their journey throughout the transition process. It also cannot determine how much the participants' current experiences of the transition process were influenced by past experiences. Therefore, longitudinal studies could be used to more fully explore this process as it is happening. This could mean that perceived future challenges (such as hormone therapy) could be compared to the actual experience of this for partners. It could also mean that relationship issues at each stage of the transition process could be more fully explored, as well as those relationships that end at particular points. Longitudinal studies could be particularly useful due to research suggesting that romantic partners' memories of past relationship events can be biased (Karney & Coombs, 2000; Luchies et. Al. (2013).

Indeed, due to the research relying solely on the voice of the partner, future studies could include both male cisgender participants and their trans partners. This may allow a researcher to ascertain how relationship dynamics suggested by the participants in this research manifest, for example, the apparent tendency for

partners to put their trans partner's needs first. Another less direct way to do this could be to research couple therapists who work with these groups.

Furthermore, general research investigating the opinions and experiences of counsellors, psychotherapists and other caring professionals would be a fertile topic of study. Due to the supposed 'cultural shift' happening regarding trans issues within society (with them becoming more visible and a cultural backlash happening) it would be useful to see how this has influenced professional opinion. In addition it would be useful to investigate how much of the residue of previous attitudes, for example that transgender relationships are unlikely to survive transition, still remain (Meyerowitz, 2002, as cited in Meier et al., 2013).

6.5 Reflexive Reflections

A discussion on the concept of 'reflexivity' is required due to this being seen as an essential process in qualitative research (Parahoo, 2006, as cited in Lamber, Jomeen & McSherry, 2010). This is particularly the case in this research due to my personal experience of the research topic, so that I could position myself in relation to data that I encountered. I remained reflexive and limited bias throughout the research process by keeping a research journal, similar in form to what is recommended by Etherington (2004). With the insight I have gained from this process and now that I am at the end of my research journey, I am in a good position to elaborate upon how my perspective on trans partnerships has shifted. It has been almost six years since I began this research and during this time I have gone from

being in a trans relationship, that was rather ambiguous and uncertain, to this ending and me trying to put this experience behind me (due to this being a largely negative experience for me). Although researching this was personally challenging, I am glad that I stayed with this topic as it has helped me to challenge assumptions that I might have generalised to other trans relationships.

My own personal experience in this area was of being friends with a trans person for six years, then being in a romantic relationship with them for approximately two years. The nature of the relationship was often confusing and undefined, and I felt a general sense of uncertainty due to my partner frequently changing their mind about whether they wanted to transition or not. Various issues and themes that emerged for me were often related to this sense of ambiguity, confusion and disorientation, for example, identity confusion and lack of knowing what my role was in the relationship. My identity often felt diminished in terms of my partner due to me feeling the need to put my partner's needs first. This was due to trans-related issues seeming to overshadow other personal and relationship issues. My difficulty at dealing with these issues and the negative outcome of my relationship led me to define this as a 'negative' experience. Through being reflexive I became aware of the potential I had to view the experiences of participants through a negative lens, for example my initial surprise at how healthy their relationships seemed and how well participants seemed to cope. Although the participants and I shared many of the same issues, it seems that the majority of them were able to work through these, aided by good communication and going through adversity enabled them to embrace various benefits. I therefore no longer believe that being a cisgender partner in a trans relationship is inherently negative or challenging over the long term of the relationship. While partners may

experience unique challenges at certain points in time, I now believe that trans relationships are much more similar to non trans relationships than I did previously. This is in terms of them requiring the same components to function as any other healthy relationship. Both trans relationships and non trans relationships can be dysfunctional, and through immersing myself in the experiences of the participants I realise that my relationship was dysfunctional and this was not necessitated by my partner being transgender. Through becoming aware of this through reflexivity I believe that I have provided a “quality control” on the research and developed a richer, more considered analysis (Braun & Clark, 2013).

It feels apt to highlight the fact that I designed and conducted a study that was inspired by a profoundly personal experience, but a study for which I, myself, would not meet the inclusion criteria due to me not entering the relationship unaware that my partner was trans. Yet, despite what might have appeared to be an initial advantage, one which none of the participants had, my relationship seemed to be more challenging and dysfunctional than any of their relationships. This leads me to believe that we really do not ever know what we sign up for in love or life, and any certainties that we cling to are mere illusions; it is perhaps how we negotiate the uncertainty together that counts. It is possible that not having the knowledge that their partner was trans helped the participants to embrace the uncertainty more than if they had had some prior knowledge which might have given the illusion of there being more certainty than was actually present.

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8 Appendices

Appendix 1-Ethical clearance

Middlesex University, Department of Psychology

REQUEST FOR ETHICAL APPROVAL (STUDENT)

Applicant (specify): UG PG (Module: Doctorate) PhD

Date submitted:.....

| | | | | |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------|---------------|------------------------------------------------------------|--------|
| Research area (please circle) | | | | |
| Clinical | Cognition + Emotion | Developmental | Forensic | Health |
| Occupational | Psychophysiological | Social | Sport + Exercise | |
| Other __ Counselling Psychology _____ | | | Sensitive Topic <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> | |
| Methodology: | | | | |
| Empirical/Experimental | Questionnaire-based | Qualitative ✓ | Other _____ | |
| <p>No study may proceed until this form has been signed by an authorised person indicating that ethical approval has been granted. For collaborative research with another institution, ethical approval must be obtained from all institutions involved.</p> <p>This form should be accompanied by any other relevant materials (e.g. questionnaire to be employed, letters to participants/institutions, advertisements or recruiting materials, information and debriefing sheet for participants¹, consent form², including approval by collaborating institutions).</p> | | | | |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Is this the first submission of the proposed study? | | | | Yes |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Is this an amended proposal (resubmission)? | | | | No |

| | | | |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------|---------------------|
| Psychology Office: If YES, please send this back to the original referee | | | |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Is this an urgent application? (<u>To be answered by Staff/Supervisor only</u>)¹ | | | No |
| Supervisor to initial here _____ | | | |
| <u>Name(s) of investigator</u> Paul Rankeillor | | | |
| <u>Name of Supervisor (s)</u> Gillian Proctor (1 st) Patricia Bonnici (2 nd). | | | |
| Title of Study: Perceived Identity change in the partners of trans people, as a result of being in a trans relationship: A study utilising Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis | | | |
| <u>Results of Application:</u> <p style="text-align: center;">REVIEWER – please tick and provide comments in section 5:</p> | | | |
| APPROVED | APPROVED SUBJECT TO AMENDMENTS | APPROVED SUBJECT TO RECEIPT OF LETTERS | NOT APPROVED |

SECTION 1

| |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <p>1. Please attach a brief description of the nature and purpose of the study, including details of the procedure to be employed. Identify the ethical issues involved, particularly in relation to the treatment/experiences of participants, session length, procedures, stimuli, responses, data collection, and the storage and reporting of data.</p> <p style="text-align: center;">SEE ATTACHED PROJECT PROPOSAL</p> |
| <p>2. Could any of these procedures result in any adverse reactions? YES</p> <p style="padding-left: 40px;">If “yes”, what precautionary steps are to be taken?</p> <p>Participants could become distressed due to the sensitive nature of the topic. They may be potentially emotionally vulnerable due to relationship related stress, and the nature of the changes that may be occurring in their lives.</p> |

¹ See Guidelines on MyUnihub

A time frame has been imposed on participants, that they must have received their partner's disclosure of a trans identity more than 1 year ago. This is due to research indicating that partners may experience this disclosure similarly to a bereavement. This is to allow participants to reflect on the experience, to have the opportunity to confide in friends and family, or to explore it in therapy. This will help to ensure that people are less emotionally vulnerable and able to give informed consent, and to be robust enough to withstand the interview process.

As part of the research procedure, potential participants, will be phoned prior to their proposed time of participation. This will be to check they meet the criteria of the study, and to elicit information about their emotional state, and the support networks that are available to them. People who seem to be in a heightened emotional state, or have little or no support networks, or declare they have severe mental health issues, will not be interviewed.

Face to face interviewing will be employed whenever possible, (only at the participants express wishes will Skype be utilised). This will allow the researcher to become greater attuned to the participant's emotional state, to build rapport, and more able to intervene if needed to support the participant. If needed interviews will be suspended or terminated. Before the interview commences participants will be reminded that they can withdraw at any point, or ask for a break. In the case of the interview being terminated the participants will be debriefed and asked if they wish the data collected up until this point destroyed. If this is the case the digital recording will immediately be deleted.

As part of the debriefing procedure participants will be given a prepared information pack of potential sources of support. This will include contact details of support agencies such as Samaritans, details of online communities and details of counsellors who have expertise in the trans gender field, as well as other local and national resources. Although the interviews are expected to last 45-75 minutes, the interview rooms will be booked for 2 hours. This is to allow extra time for the debriefing processes should this be required.

Participants will be offered post participation support, in the form of a follow up phone call, at an arranged time, a few days after the interview.

Participants will be given the NSPC's phone number and email, my supervisors name and email, and my University email, so they can make contact should they wish to complain, or should questions arise.

3. Will any form of deception be involved that raises ethical issues?

NO

(Most studies in psychology involve mild deception insofar as participants are unaware of the experimental hypotheses being tested. Deception becomes unethical if participants are likely to feel angry, humiliated or otherwise distressed when the deception is revealed to them).

Note: if this work uses existing records/archives and does not require participation per se, tick here

and go to question 10. (Ensure that your data handling complies with the Data Protection Act).

4. If participants other than Middlesex University students are to be involved, where do you intend to recruit them? (*A full risk assessment must be conducted for any work undertaken off university premises*)^{6,7}

I will recruit participants through use of a facebook webpage that I will develop directly for the purposes of the study. Participants will contact me via this in order to find out information about the study and to arrange to take part. This webpage will be advertised through me posting links to it (with the permission of the moderators) on trans online community forums.

5a. Does the study involve:

| | |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----|
| Clinical populations | NO |
| Children (under 16 years) | NO |
| Vulnerable adults such as individuals with mental or physical health problems, prisoners, vulnerable elderly, young offenders? | NO |
| Political, ethnic or religious groups/minorities? | NO |
| Sexually explicit material / issues relating to sexuality | YES |

5b. If the study involves any of the above, the researcher may need CRB (police check)

Staff and PG students are expected to have CRB – please tick ✓

YES

UG students are advised that institutions may require them to have CRB
please confirm that you are aware of this by ticking here _____

6. How, and from whom (e.g. from parents, from participants via signature) will informed consent be obtained? (*See consent guidelines²; note special considerations for some questionnaire research*)

An information sheet detailing the nature of the study and the requirements of participation, will be emailed to the participant at least 48 hours before participation. This will be written in simple language targeted to the lay person. This will help ensure informed consent by the participant knowing what they are consenting too, and them having time to consider whether they wish to take part.

The pre-participation phone call which will happen after this, will also help ensure informed consent by checking that the participant knows what is required of them by the study, and assess their suitability to take part. People who are deemed too emotionally vulnerable to give true informed consent will be screened out at this stage.

Upon meeting with the researcher, for the interview, the researcher will go through the consent form with the participant, and they will sign this if they choose to go ahead. They will be reminded about their right to withdraw their consent at any point during the research process.

7. Will you inform participants of their right to withdraw from the research at any time, YES without penalty? (*see consent guidelines²*)

8. Will you provide a full debriefing at the end of the data collection phase? YES
(*see debriefing guidelines³*)

9. Will you be available to discuss the study with participants, if necessary, to monitor any negative effects or misconceptions? YES

If "no", how do you propose to deal with any potential problems?

10. Under the Data Protection Act, participant information is confidential unless otherwise agreed in advance. Will confidentiality be guaranteed? YES
(*see confidentiality guidelines⁵*)

If "yes" how will this be assured (*see⁵*)

I will keep a participant list, and to obtain signed approval from each participant. This will be stored securely in a locked cabinet.

Immediately after the interview, the audio recording will be transferred to computer. As soon as this happens, the audio recording on the Dictaphone will

be deleted. This will limit the chances of someone being recognised by voice. The computer itself will be password protected, as will each participants audio file, hence creating a double encryption. The file name will be a pseudonym, real names will not be used.

During the transcription process I will label each transcript with this pseudonym, opposed to a real name. I will perform the transcribing myself opposed to enlisting the services of a transcribing company. I will keep hard copies of transcripts in a locked cabinet at all times when not in use. Raw data will be destroyed 6 months after graduation.

Participants will be warned about the limits to their confidentiality, in other words the circumstances under which information that they disclose would need to be passed onto a third party, risk of harm to others, legal reasons etc.

Participants will be informed that the verbatim of their interview may be directly quoted, in the final thesis, which could be made public in the advent of publishing. If this is the case then identifiable characteristics, such as geographical location or profession will be omitted or changed.

Participants will be informed on the consent form about the possibility that there data may be requested for institutional audits, and therefore that their identity may be revealed to the auditors. Participants will have the option of ticking this section of the form if they want to opt out of this.

If “no”, how will participants be warned? (*see*⁵)

(NB: You are not at liberty to publish material taken from your work with individuals without the prior agreement of those individuals).

| | |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----|
| 11. Are there any ethical issues that concern you about this particular piece of research, not covered elsewhere on this form? | NO |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----|

| | |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------|
| If "yes" please specify: | |
| 12. Is this research or part of it going to be conducted in a language other than English? | NO |
| If YES – Do you confirm that all documents and materials are enclosed here both in English and the other language, and that each one is an accurate translation of the other? | YES/NO |

(NB: If "yes" has been responded to any of questions 2, 3, 5, 11, 12 or "no" to any of questions 7-10, a full explanation of the reason should be provided – if necessary, on a separate sheet submitted with this form).

SECTION 2 (to be completed by all applicants – please tick as appropriate)

| | YES | NO |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----|----|
| 13. Some or all of this research is to be conducted away from Middlesex University | ✓ | |
| If “yes” tick here to confirm that a Risk Assessment form has been submitted | ✓ | |
| 14. I am aware that any modifications to the design or method of this proposal will require me to submit a new application for ethical approval | ✓ | |
| 15. I am aware that I need to keep all the materials/documents relating to this study (e.g. consent forms, filled questionnaires, etc) until completion of my degree / publication (as advised) | ✓ | |
| 16. I have read the British Psychological Society’s <i>Ethical Principles for Conducting Research with Human participants</i> ⁴ and believe this proposal to conform with them. | ✓ | |

SECTION 3 (to be completed by STUDENT applicants and supervisors)

Researcher: (student signature) _____ date _____

CHECKLIST FOR SUPERVISOR – please tick as appropriate

| | YES | NO |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----|----|
| 1. Is the UG/PG module specified? | | |
| 2. If it is a resubmission, has this been specified and the original form enclosed here? | | |

| | | |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--|--|
| | | |
| 3. Is the name(s) of student/researcher(s) specified? | | |
| 4. Is the name(s) of supervisor specified? | | |
| 5. Is the consent form attached? | | |
| 6. Are debriefing procedures specified? If appropriate, debriefing sheet enclosed – appropriate style? | | |
| 7. Is an information sheet for participants enclosed? appropriate style? | | |
| 8. Does the information sheet contain contact details for the researcher and supervisor? | | |
| 9. Is the information sheet sufficiently informative about the study? | | |
| 10. Has Section 2 been completed by the researcher on the ethics form? | | |
| 11. Any parts of the study to be conducted outside the university? If so a Risk Assessment form must be attached – Is it? | | |
| 12. Any parts of the study to be conducted on another institution's premises? If so a letter of acceptance by the institution must be obtained - Letters of acceptance by all external institutions are attached. | | |
| 13. Letter(s) of acceptance from external institutions have been requested and will be submitted to the PSY office ASAP. | | |
| 14. Has the student signed the form? If physical or electronic signatures are not available, an email endorsing the application must be attached. | | |
| 15. Is the proposal sufficiently informative about the study? | | |

Signatures of approval:

PSY OFFICE
received

Supervisor: _____ date: _____
 date:.....

Ethics Panel: _____ date: _____
 date:.....

(signed pending approval of Risk Assessment form)
 date:.....

If any of the following is required and not available when submitting this form, the Ethics Panel Reviewer will need to see them once they are received – please enclose with this form when they become available:

- letter of acceptance from other institution
- any other relevant document (e.g. ethical approval from other institution):

received PSY OFFICE

Required documents seen by Ethics Panel: _____ date: _____
 date:.....

SECTION 4 (to be completed by the Psychology Ethics panel reviewers)

| | | Recommendations/comments |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--|--------------------------|
| 1. Is UG/PG module specified? | | |
| 2. If it is a resubmission, has this been specified and the original form enclosed here? | | |

| | | |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--|--|
| 3. Is the name(s) of student/ researcher(s) specified? If physical or electronic signatures are not available, has an email endorsing the application been attached? | | |
| 4. Is the name(s) of supervisor specified? If physical or electronic signatures are not available, has an email endorsing the application been attached? | | |
| 5. Is the consent form attached? | | |
| 6. Are debriefing procedures specified? If appropriate, is the debriefing sheet attached? Is this sufficiently informative? | | |
| 7. Is an information sheet for participants attached? | | |
| 8. Does the information sheet contain contact details for the researcher? | | |
| 9. Is the information sheet sufficiently informative about the study? Appropriate style? | | |
| 10. Has Section 2 (points 12-15) been ticked by the researcher on the ethics form? | | |
| 11. Any parts of the study to be conducted outside the university? If so a fully completed Risk Assessment form must be attached – is it? | | |
| 12. If any parts of the study are conducted on another institution/s premises, a letter of agreement by the institution/s must be produced. Are letter/s of acceptance by all external institution/s attached? | | |
| 13. Letter/s of acceptance by external institution/s has/have been requested. | | |
| 14. Has the applicant signed? If physical or electronic signatures are not available, an email endorsing the application must be attached. | | |
| 15. Is the proposal sufficiently informative about the study? Any clarity issues? | | |
| 16. Is anyone likely to be disadvantaged or harmed? | | |
| 17. If deception, protracted testing or sensitive aspects are involved, do the benefits of the study outweigh these undesirable aspects? | | |
| 18. Is this research raising any conflict of interest concerns? | | |

Appendix 2. Risk Assessment

INDEPENDENT FIELD/LOCATION WORK RISK ASSESSMENT

FRA1

This proforma is applicable to, and must be completed in advance for, the following field/location work situations:

- 1. All field/location work undertaken independently by individual students, either in the UK or overseas, including in connection with proposition module or dissertations. Supervisor to complete with student(s).*
- 2. All field/location work undertaken by postgraduate students. Supervisors to complete with student(s).*
- 3. Field/location work undertaken by research students. Student to complete with supervisor.*
- 4. Field/location work/visits by research staff. Researcher to complete with Research Centre Head.*
- 5. Essential information for students travelling abroad can be found on www.fco.gov.uk*

FIELD/LOCATION WORK DETAILS

Name Paul Rankeillor.....

Student No M00386557

Research Centre (staff only).....

Supervisor ...Gillian Proctor (1st) Patricia Bonnici
(2nd).....

Degree course ...Dpsych Existential Psychotherapy and
Counselling.....

Telephone numbers and name of
next of kin who may be contacted in
the event of an accident

NEXT OF KIN

Name ...James Rankeillor.....

Phone ...01334 880417 07901956571.....

**Physical or psychological limitations
to carrying out the proposed**

field/location work

...None.....

.....

.....

Any health problems (full details)

...None.....

Which may be relevant to proposed field/location work activity in case of emergencies.

.....

Locality (Country and Region)

...Interviews will be carried out in the UK, with a focus on London, due to this being where my course is based, however there will be consideration given to where the participants who are recruited are based, so this might involve the research happening in areas across the UK.....

.....

Travel Arrangements

...I will fund my own travel which will be by train or bus.....

.....

NB: Comprehensive travel and health insurance must always be obtained for independent overseas field/location work.

.....

.....

Dates of Travel and Field/location work

As yet unknown, as this will depend on when I gain ethical approval and progress to the next stage of my research.....

.....

PLEASE READ THE FOLLOWING INFORMATION VERY CAREFULLY

Hazard Identification and Risk Assessment

List the localities to be visited or specify routes to be followed (**Col. 1**). For each locality, enter the potential hazards that may be identified beyond those accepted in everyday life. Add details giving cause for concern (**Col. 2**).

Examples of Potential Hazards :

Adverse weather: exposure (heat, sunburn, lightening, wind, hypothermia)

Terrain: rugged, unstable, fall, slip, trip, debris, and remoteness. Traffic: pollution.

Demolition/building sites, assault, getting lost, animals, disease.

Working on/near water: drowning, swept away, disease (weils disease, hepatitis, malaria, etc), parasites', flooding, tides and range.

Lone working: difficult to summon help, alone or in isolation, lone interviews.

Dealing with the public: personal attack, causing offence/intrusion, misinterpreted, political, ethnic, cultural, socio-economic differences/problems. Known or suspected criminal offenders.

Safety Standards (other work organisations, transport, hotels, etc), working at night, areas of high crime.

Ill health: personal considerations or vulnerabilities, pre-determined medical conditions (asthma, allergies, fitting) general fitness, disabilities, persons suited to task.

Articles and equipment: inappropriate type and/or use, failure of equipment, insufficient training for use and repair, injury.

Substances (chemicals, plants, bio- hazards, waste): ill health - poisoning, infection, irritation, burns, cuts, eye-damage.

Manual handling: lifting, carrying, moving large or heavy items, physical unsuitability for task

If no hazard can be identified beyond those of everyday life, enter 'NONE'.

| 1. LOCALITY/ROUTE | 2. POTENTIAL HAZARDS |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1: Lone Working, as due to face to face interviews, I will be in a room alone with the participant | Difficulty to summon help, if participants become aggressive, violent, or indicate extreme emotional distress. |

| | |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <p>2: Dealing with the public, who are relative strangers and fairly unknown to me.</p> | <p>Due to little being known about participant's background, such as offending history, this increases the likelihood of the risk of personal attack to the researcher. This is compounded by the sensitive nature of the topic, as the interview questions could cause offense, or be viewed as too intrusive, or be open to misinterpretation. The sensitive nature of the topic may bring back memories of difficult experiences that the participants underwent, which could affect their mental health.</p> |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|

The University Field/location work code of Practice booklet provides practical advice that should be followed in planning and conducting field/location work.

Risk Minimisation/Control Measures

PLEASE READ VERY CAREFULLY

For each hazard identified **(Col 2)**, list the precautions/control measures in place or that will be taken **(Col 3)** to "**reduce the risk to acceptable levels**", and the safety equipment **(Col 5)** that will be employed.

Assuming the safety precautions/control methods that will be adopted **(Col. 3)**, categorise the field/location work risk for each location/route as negligible, low, moderate or high **(Col. 4)**.

Risk increases with both the increasing likelihood of an accident and the increasing severity of the consequences of an accident.

An acceptable level of risk is: a risk which can be safely controlled by person taking part in the activity using the precautions and control measures noted including the necessary instructions, information and training relevant to that risk. The resultant risk should not be significantly higher than that encountered in everyday life.

Examples of control measures/precautions:

Providing adequate training, information & instructions on field/location work tasks and the safe and correct use of any equipment, substances and personal protective equipment. Inspection and safety check of any equipment prior to use. Assessing individuals fitness and suitability to environment and tasks involved. Appropriate clothing, environmental information consulted and advice followed (weather conditions, tide times etc.). Seek advice on harmful plants, animals & substances that may be encountered, including information and instruction on safe procedures for handling hazardous substances. First aid provisions, inoculations, individual medical requirements,

logging of location, route and expected return times of lone workers. Establish emergency procedures (means of raising an alarm, back up arrangements). Working with colleagues (pairs). **Lone working is not permitted where the risk of physical or verbal violence is a realistic possibility.** Training in interview techniques and avoiding /defusing conflict, following advice from local organisations, wearing of clothing unlikely to cause offence or unwanted attention. Interviews in neutral locations. Checks on Health and Safety standards & welfare facilities of travel, accommodation and outside organisations. Seek information on social/cultural/political status of field/location work area.

Examples of Safety Equipment: Hardhats, goggles, gloves, harness, waders, whistles, boots, mobile phone, ear protectors, bright fluorescent clothing (for roadside work), dust mask, etc.

If a proposed locality has not been visited previously, give your authority for the risk assessment stated or indicate that your visit will be preceded by a thorough risk assessment.

| 3. PRECAUTIONS/CONTROL MEASURES | 4. RISK ASSESSMENT (low, moderate, high) | 5. SAFETY/EQUIPMENT |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------|
| <p>Lone Working</p> <p>The researcher will book interview rooms, in counselling or conference centres, in a central location.</p> <p>These will be used within office hours, when there are other people around, and someone on reception.</p> <p>The room that the researcher is in, and the duration it will be used for will be recorded and monitored by reception staff. Where possible the NSPC Existential Academy will be utilised for interviews.</p> <p>The researcher will phone their next of kin immediately before each interview to check in, and immediately after each interview, to check out. During the check in the researcher will provide their next of kin with the address and phone number of the interview venue, and their estimated time of check out. If the researcher does not check out within 30 minutes of their</p> | <p>Low</p> | <p>Personal alarm, obtained from local police station.</p> |

estimated check out time, their next of kin will phone the reception of the interview venue.

The researcher will carry a personal alarm.

Working with the public

As per the research procedure I will be giving potential participants, a pre-participation phone call, this will provide me with more information about them, for example, their emotional state, how they feel towards the topic etc, and to help build rapport. It will allow me to find out if participants fit the inclusion criteria, and that they are aware of the nature of the study and what it involves.

The participant information sheet will endeavour to provide participants with detailed information in a language directed towards the lay person, this should help ensure that participants understand the nature of the study, and therefore can make an informed decision about whether or not to take part. This could help limit the tendency for participants to take offense or feel that the study is too intrusive.

Face to face interviewing will allow me access to participants body non-verbal communication, such as body language, tone of voice, this will be closely monitored. I will use the counselling skills that I have developed, to help manage distress and frustration.

As part of my current employment I have been trained in non-violent Crisis Prevention Intervention (CPI). This means that I have knowledge of de-escalation and breakaway techniques, and can apply these skills if required to manage actual or potential aggression.

With regards to managing potential distress of Participants, I have been trained through my current employer in Applied Suicide Intervention Skills Training (ASIST), and can utilise the techniques I have learned through this, for example to disable suicide plans.

Low

Participants will be reminded before they begin the interview that they can ask for the interview to be suspended at any point, as well as terminate the interview if they feel they need too. In the case of termination, the audio recording will be destroyed if they request there data to not be included.

The interview room will be booked for 2 hours, with interviews expected to last 45-70 minutes, this is to allow plenty of time for debriefing, participants should this be required. As per debriefing procedure participants will be provided with a ready-made pack of support agencies and specialised therapists, that they can contact for further support, after their participation should they wish. Participants will also be given the option of a follow up phone call, from me, a few days after the interview, to discuss any issues that may have come up for them after their participation.

| | | |
|--|--|--|
| | | |
|--|--|--|

PLEASE READ THE FOLLOWING INFORMATION AND SIGN AS APPROPRIATE

DECLARATION: The undersigned have assessed the activity and the associated risks and declare that there is no significant risk or that the risk will be controlled by the method(s) listed above/over. Those participating in the work have read the assessment and will put in place precautions/control measures identified.

NB: Risk should be constantly reassessed during the field/location work period and additional precautions taken or field/location work discontinued if the risk is seen to be unacceptable.

Signature of Field/location worker
(Student/Staff)

Date

Signature of Student Supervisor Date

APPROVAL: (ONE ONLY)

Signature of
Director of Programmes Date

(undergraduate students only)

Signature of Research Degree Co-
ordinator or Date

Director of Programmes
(Postgraduate)

Signature of Research Centre
Head (for staff field/location Date

workers)

FIELD/LOCATION WORK CHECK LIST

1. Ensure that **all members** of the field party possess the following attributes (where relevant) at a level appropriate to the proposed activity and likely field conditions:

- Safety knowledge and training?
- Awareness of cultural, social and political differences?
- Physical and psychological fitness and disease immunity, protection and awareness?
- Personal clothing and safety equipment?
- Suitability of field/location workers to proposed tasks?

2. Have all the necessary arrangements been made and information/instruction gained, and have the relevant authorities been consulted or informed with regard to:

- Visa, permits?
- Legal access to sites and/or persons?
- Political or military sensitivity of the proposed topic, its method or location?
- Weather conditions, tide times and ranges?
- Vaccinations and other health precautions?
- Civil unrest and terrorism?
- Arrival times after journeys?
- Safety equipment and protective clothing?
- Financial and insurance implications?
- Crime risk?
- Health insurance arrangements?
- Emergency procedures?
- Transport use?

- Travel and accommodation arrangements?

Important information for retaining evidence of completed risk assessments:

Once the risk assessment is completed and approval gained the **supervisor** should retain this form and issue a copy of it to the field/location worker participating on the field course/work. In addition the **approver** must keep a copy of this risk assessment in an appropriate Health and Safety file.



Middlesex University School of Health and
Social Sciences



Psychology Department

Written Informed Consent

NSPC Ltd
University

61-63 Fortune Green Rd,
Burroughs,

London NW6 1DR
NW4 4BT

Middlesex

The

London

Perceived Identity change in the partners of Trans people, as a result of being in a trans relationship: A study utilising Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis.

Researcher: Paul Rankeillor

Supervisor (*only for students*): Dr Werner Kierski

I have understood the details of the research as explained to me by the researcher, and confirm that I have consented to act as a participant.

I have been given contact details for the researcher in the information sheet.

I understand that my participation is entirely voluntary, the data collected during the research will not be identifiable, and I have the right to withdraw from the project at any time without any obligation to explain my reasons for doing so.

I further understand that the data I provide may be used for analysis and subsequent publication, and provide my consent that this might occur.

Print name

Sign Name

date: _____

To the participants: Data may be inspected by the Chair of the Psychology Ethics panel and the Chair of the School of Social Sciences Ethics committee of Middlesex University, if required by institutional audits about the correctness of procedures. Although this would happen in strict confidentiality, please tick here if you do not wish your data to be included in audits:

If you have any further questions, you can contact me at:

61-63 Fortune Green Rd,

London NW6 1DR

PR356@live.mdx.ac.uk

If you any concerns about the conduct of the study, you may contact my supervisor:

Dr Werner Kierski

61-63 Fortune Green Rd,

London NW6 1DR

werner.kierski@zen.co.uk

Or

The Principal

NSPC Ltd. 61-63 Fortune Green Rd,

London NW6 1DR

Admin@nspc.org.uk

0845 557 7752

Appendix 4-Participant Information Sheet



Information about a research project



Perceived Identity change in the partners of

Trans people, as a result of being in a Trans relationship: A study utilising Interpretative phenomenological Analysis.

Being carried out by: Paul Rankeillor

as a requirement for a Doctorate in Existential Psychotherapy and Counselling

from NSPC and Middlesex University

Dated: [18/11/2017]

You are being invited to take part in a research study. Before you decide to participate, it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take your time to read the following information carefully, and discuss it with others if you wish. Please ask if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information. Take your time to decide whether or not you wish to take part.

What is the purpose of the research?

This study is being carried out as part of my studies at NSPC Ltd and Middlesex University.

The aim of the research is to examine how a person's identity is affected as a result of their participation in a romantic relationship with a Trans person. This is due to the partner's perspective not being adequately researched thus far, and the greater acknowledgement of the effect that transition can have on the non-transitioning partner in recent literature. This is particularly the case with male partners, due to the lack of research with this group.

My study is designed to explore how you have experienced and negotiated your partner's transition, and the impact you feel this has had on your wellbeing and identity. You are being asked to participate because you replied to my advertisement and because you fit all the other required criteria for the study.

What will happen to me if I take part?

You will first be asked to complete a short questionnaire asking you background questions about yourself and your relationship; this is to help the researcher contextualise your experience, and to check that you fit the criteria for the study. The next step in the process will be for us to have a 5-10 minute pre-participation phone/Skype call, this will be to double check that you are aware of what the study involves and that you fit the criteria to take part. After this we will arrange a mutually beneficial time for a research interview. The location of the interview will be in a confidential room, in a counselling or conference centre, which will be picked due to its location being convenient to you. Although face 2 face interviewing is preferred, if you don't feel able to commit to this then you can

request a skype interview. You will be interviewed on one occasion. This should take between 45-75 minutes. You will then be asked broad and open questions about your experience of being in a Trans relationship. At times I may prompt you for more details about something you are saying, to access your experience in more depth. The debriefing that we will have after the interview, will give you a chance to express what came up for you during the interview, and for us to look at ways of you accessing support post interview, should you require this. You will also be given the option of me phoning you, at a prearranged time a short period of time after the interview, for you discuss anything that may have come up. After your interview I will use a qualitative research method to extract the main themes present in what you have told me about your experience.

What will you do with the information that I provide?

The interview will be recorded using a digital recording device. The audio file stored on this will then be immediately transferred to my computer, and at this point the audio file will be deleted. The computer file will be encrypted, and the computer itself password protected. Your data file will be ascribed a code name, so that you are not identifiable. The audio file will then be transcribed, which I will do personally. Any hard copies of transcripts, that may be printed during the research process, will be assigned a code name to protect your identity. These will be stored in a locked cabinet when not in use.

The information will be kept at least until 6 months after I graduate, and will be treated as confidential. Please note that what you say in the interview may be quoted verbatim in the completed research thesis, unless you specify that you do not agree to this. If my research is published, I will make sure that neither your name or other identifying details are used.

Data will be stored according the UK the Data Protection Act and the Freedom of Information Act

What are the possible disadvantages of taking part?

Due to this topic being of a sensitive nature, there is a potential that you may become distressed, or you may find the interview too intrusive. If this is the case then, please let me know, and if you wish, we can have a break or the interview can be terminated. In the case of the interview being terminated, I will discuss with you if you want the data collected thus far, to be destroyed, or if you are happy for it to still be used.

Although this is very unlikely, should you tell me something that I am required by law to pass on to a third person, I will have to do so. Otherwise whatever you tell me will be confidential.

What are the possible benefits of taking part?

There are no direct benefits for you to take part in the study, although your contribution may be of benefit to the transgender field. We currently do not know the effect that transitioning has on the non-transitioning partner, in the case of male partners. At the moment we can only generalise from research that has been conducted on female partners. For this reason I hope that the research will add a body of knowledge to the transgender field that will be of benefit to professionals who work with Trans people and their partners, as well as beneficial to Trans people and their significant others. The main aim is to give voice to male partners of Trans people. As a participant of this research you may find it useful to have an opportunity to reflect on your experience, and beneficial to have your voice heard, although this cannot be known in advance.

6. Consent

You will be given a copy of this information sheet for your personal records, and if you agree to take part, you will be asked to sign the attached consent form before the study begins.

Participation in this research is entirely voluntary. You do not have to take part if you do not want to. If you decide to take part you may withdraw at any time without giving a reason.

7. Who is organising and funding the research?

The research is self-funded and self-directed.

8. Who has reviewed the study?

All proposals for research using human participants are reviewed by an Ethics Committee before they can proceed. The NSPC research ethics sub-committee have approved this study

[9. Expenses

As the study is not funded, there is no option for you to receiving payment for your participation, however reasonable travel expenses will be reimbursed.

Thank you for reading this information sheet.

If you have any further questions, you can contact me at:

61-63 Fortune Green Rd,

London NW6 1DR

PR356@live.mdx.ac.uk

If you any concerns about the conduct of the study, you may contact my supervisor:

Dr Werner Kierski

61-63 Fortune Green Rd,

London NW6 1DR

werner.kierski@zen.co.uk

Or

The Principal

NSPC Ltd. 61-63 Fortune Green Rd,

London NW6 1DR

Admin@nspc.org.uk

0845 557 7752

Appendix 5- Pre Participation Questionnaire

About you

1. Age. 18-25 26-35 26-45 46-55 56-65 66 +

2. Ethnic Background

White

British
Irish
Any other white background

Mixed

White and black Caribbean
White and black African
White and Asian
Other mixed background

Asian or Asian British

Indian
Pakistani
Bangladeshi
Other Asian background
Please specify

Black or black British

Caribbean
African
Any other black background

Other ethnic groups

Chinese
Other ethnic groups
Please specify
Not stated

3. Religious Belief. Christian Buddhist Hindu Jewish

 Muslim Sikh None Prefer not to say

 Other (please specify

4. Relationship Status Single Married Divorced in a committed relationship
In a casual relationship Other please describe _____

About your Relationship background

Please tick the statement that most applies to you.

I have had one relationship with a Trans person

I have had more than one relationship with trans people

About your current or most recent trans relationship

I am currently in a relationship with a trans person Yes No

If no can you tell me how long ago this ended _____

How long have you been in this relationship/how long did this relationship last for?

6 months- 1 year 1-2 Years 2-5 year 5+ years

If this relationship is current, how long is it since your partner disclosed their trans identity to you?

If this relationship is no longer current, how far into the relationship did your partner disclose their trans identity to you? _____

About Your current Trans partner or most recent Trans Partner

5. Age. 18-25 26-35 26-45 46-55 56-65 66 +

6. Sexual Orientation Gay Bisexual Heterosexual Other
Lesbian Prefer not to disclose Please define _____

7. Ethnic Background

White

British

Irish

Any other white background

Mixed

White and black Caribbean

Black or black British

Caribbean

African

Any other black background

Other ethnic groups

Chinese

- | | | | |
|-------------------------|--------------------------|----------------------|--------------------------|
| White and black African | <input type="checkbox"/> | Other ethnic groups | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| White and Asian | <input type="checkbox"/> | Please specify | |
| Other mixed background | <input type="checkbox"/> | Not stated | <input type="checkbox"/> |

Asian or Asian British

- | | |
|------------------------|--------------------------|
| Indian | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Pakistani | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Bangladeshi | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Other Asian background | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Please specify | |

8. Religious Belief. Christian Buddhist Hindu Jewish

Which stage(s) of the transition process did/has your (ex)partner experienced?

- Change of pronoun Disclose of trans identity to friends/family/Work Colleagues etc
 Hormone Therapy Living in the role of their desired Gender Gender Reassignment
 Surgery Other _____

Appendix 6- Interview Guide with Four World Prompts

| <u>Main Interview Questions</u> | Physical dimension | Social dimension | Psychological dimension | Spiritual dimension |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1 Tell me about your experience of being in a relationship with a trans person? | <i>i.e. can you tell me more about the physically related changes your partner has made, and how this has affected you?</i> | i.e. can you tell me more about your partner changing pronoun and the affects that this has had? | i.e. Can you tell me more about how you felt when your partner disclosed their trans identity to you? | i.e. Can you tell more about the significant you give to such relationships? |
| 2 How does this compare with your previous experiences of relationships? | I.e. Can you tell me more about your different experiences of sex and physical intimacy in the relationships that you have had? | | How do you feel thinking about this? | i.e. Can you tell me more about how this has influenced your view on relationships in general? |
| 3 Tell me about your identity as a partner in a trans relationship?. | i.e Can you tell me more about your relationship to your own body? | i.e can you tell me more about your sense of belonging in society, due to you changing the label you use to describe yourself? | | i.e can you tell me more about the new identity that you mentioned you developed, and what meaning that this has for you? |
| 4 How has this | i.e can you tell | Can you tell me | How did this | Can you tell me |

| | | | | |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| changed during the course of the relationship? | me more about how this has been influenced by differing sexual practices you have tried with your partner? | more about How you negotiated these changes in your relationship? | affect you? | more about how this affected your values, and what you want from life? |
| 5 How do you feel your relationship relates to how others view you? | i.e can you tell me more about the perceptions you feel other people have of your sexual orientation, and the sexual relations that you have with your partner? | | How do you feel about this? | What meaning do you give to this? |
| 6. Do you feel that this is substantially different to how you view yourself? If yes, in what ways? | I.e can you tell me more about how you feel this was communicated in your body language, and your physical proximity to others? | Can you tell more about how this conflict affects your relationships with others? | | <i>i.e What meaning to you give to this?</i> |
| 7. In what ways if any do you feel your relationship was affected by your partners trans identity, and the transition related changes that they may have | I,e can you give me example of this in relation to specific aspects of the transition process? | | How did you cope with this? | i.e. can you tell me more about how this has influenced your concept of love and romance? |

| | | | | |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| gone through? | | | | |
| 8. Do you feel that this has affected your well-being? If yes in what way? | i.e can you tell me more how this this has affected your physical wellbeing? | Can you tell me more about how you negotiated this in your relationship? | | What meanings do you give to this? |
| 9. <i>Do you feel that this experience has influenced your general outlook on life? If yes can you tell me more about this?</i> | i.e Can you tell more about how this has changed the role of sex and physical intimacy? | i.e Can you tell me more about how this insight has effected your relationships with others? | i.e. Can you tell me more about how these insights affected you emotionally? | |
| 10: Do you feel that your own sense of gender or masculinity was effected by your relationship? And if so in what ways? | i.e can you tell me any of the physical implication of this? (Body image, sexual intimacy etc). | i.e did this influence you to reconsider gender as concept in society, and if so what conclusions did you come to? | | What does this mean for you in the context of your life? |
| 11. Can you tell me about any other aspect of being in a trans relationship, which hasn't been covered, which you feel is important? | i.e Can you tell me more about what you think are the physical/sexual implications of this? | i.e Can you tell me more about what you think are the social implications of this? | i.e. Can you tell me more about what you think are the emotional implications of this? | i.e Can you tell me more about what you think are the spiritual implications of this? |



Debriefing Sheet



Perceived Identity change in the partners of Trans people, as a result of being in a Trans relationship: A study utilising Interpretative phenomenological Analysis.

Thank you for taking part in this study. The study was an exploration into the identity of people who have experience of being partnered with a Trans Partner. It specifically looks at how a person's identity may change in response to this relationship. Research in the Trans field has indicated that in some circumstances a Trans person's transition and the related issues that this can entail, can evoke in the partner their own kind of transition. This can be seen as the partner adapting to a different way of life. Research has suggested that a partner's identity may be challenged in various ways, for example the partner may experience confusion over how to view their sexual orientation, and describe this to others. This research looks at how these challenges are negotiated, and the new identities that people may form as a consequence. The research focuses specifically on gay male partners, as very little research has been done on this group. The research concentrates on the earlier stages of the transition process, as it can be argued that it is a stage that is often overlooked by researchers and professionals, who may tend to focus on the later stages, such as Gender Re-assignment surgery.

The post participation phone call, which you will normally receive a few days after the interview, will allow you the opportunity to discuss anything that may have come up for you as a result of your participation. You can also phone the research phone if you wish to speak to me. This will be on Monday-Friday 9am-7pm, until (date when phone will no longer be in use), at which point this will no longer be in use. You can also email me, or contact my supervisor, (See below).

It is acknowledged that participation in this research has the potential to cause distress, due to the sensitive nature of the topic. The following are resources you can utilise for support.

Organisations

The Samaritans: <http://www.samaritans.org/> Free phone number: 116 123

Breathing Space: <http://breathingspace.scot/> Free phone number: 0800 838587

The LGBT Foundation: <https://lgbt.foundation/> Tel: 0345 330 3030

Depend Community (Online support Forum for the Family, Friends and Significant others of Trans People) <http://www.depend.org.uk/support.html>

Psychotherapists/Counsellors with Specialist in the field of Transgender

Dr Kenneth Demsky: Tel: 020 7435 6116. Email: enquiry@drkennethdemsky.co.uk Website: <http://www.drkennethdemsky.co.uk/>

Tina Livingstone: Add: c/o Premier Partnership at the Romney Centre
61 The Avenue, Southampton SO17 1XS, Tel: 0781 449 2690, Email: tina@tgfact.co.uk

David Hawley: Add: Counselling & Gestalt Therapy, 1 Harley Street, London, W1G 9QD,
Tel: 0207 307 8748/0770 335 9488, email: counsellor@lineone.net

Or to search for a psychotherapist/counsellor by location you can click on this link:

<http://gendertrust.org.uk/directory/counsellors-by-region>

Let me take this opportunity to remind you that you can still withdraw from the study at any point, without being obliged to give a reason, prior to the final thesis being submitted. You can do this by contacting myself, my supervisor, or the institution, using the contact details below. This would mean that your data would be destroyed and not included in the final thesis.

If you have any further questions, you can contact me at:

61-63 Fortune Green Rd,

London NW6 1DR

PR356@live.mdx.ac.uk

If you any concerns about the conduct of the study, you may contact my supervisor:

Dr Werner Kierski

61-63 Fortune Green Rd,

London NW6 1DR

werner.kierski@zen.co.uk

Or

The Principal

NSPC Ltd. 61-63 Fortune Green Rd,

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Admin@nspc.org.uk

0845 557 7752

THANK YOU AGAIN FOR YOUR PARTICIPATION

Appendix 8-Example Transcript with Developing Themes

Table excerpt From Anonymised Transcript (Jacob)

| Exploratory Comments | Original Transcript | Emerging Themes |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <p>A changing of how he sees sexuality as concept, this has opening up from narrower confines.</p> <p>No longer seeing the world in terms of polarities.</p> | <p>J: Now I recognise sexuality on a huge spectrum and I don't know if I would have if it wasn't for that, I don't know more modern sensibilities affected that too, but so much of that idea of spectrums and not being this or that, and just being these two extremes at all times, that was all changed for me, so I had to place myself somewhere else and so I've been able to live in little more of that grey area a lot more comfortably and recognise it in other people too.</p> | <p>Adopting a broader perspective</p> <p>Living in the grey (a less defined placed in terms of identity).</p> |
| <p>High investment in gay identity hindering ability to occupy a middle ground of identity.</p> | <p>P: So what is living in that grey area like? I mean what is it like on a day to day basis for you?</p> | <p>Sense of loss, of identity and previous way of life</p> |
| <p>Loss of gay identity</p> | <p>J: At first it was really hard, it was really challenging cause so much of my identity was wrapped up in being a gay man. That was who I was, that was how I interacted in the world, that was such a huge piece of my identity and my outward identity, so that feeling that I had to roll that back somehow, mm, it was very uncomfortable and it was very strange and I didn't know how to talk to people about who I was in general in more. That was always a very quick piece of information that I could drop that people related to right away and now even still people don't relate to my sexuality like they did then, even though, you know even though I was in the minority of people at the time it was still something that they were familiar with that they got</p> | |
| <p>Gay was like a shorthand way of communicating</p> | | |

| | | |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <p>Lack of sense of belonging, difficulty for other people to categorise.</p> | <p>that they understood, it was easy for them to wrap their minds around and connect with me but if they were straight, but know the straight people have less of an issue with it but its weird especially in queer communities where people don't really know where to put me on that scale either, cause I'm still not objectively attracted to women as a whole, its not like I woke up and suddenly though of yeah women are great but I am attracted to one women and that just is the way that life is and people have a really hard time understanding that (laughs).</p> | <p>Living in the grey (entailing that it is harder you to describe your identity and for people to relate to you).</p> |
| <p>Completely difference from how he thought he would react to this situation</p> | <p>P: So is it different from how it is in theory than in reality? Like how you said your partner was trying to test the waters with you. It was kind of different at that point as it wasn't something that you were directly involved in yet.</p> | |
| <p>When the theoretical goes to the actual.</p> | <p>J: Yeah absolutely I could have with firm confidence say oh no, I could never be with someone who is trans. I would think "oh that's a women" I'm a Gay man.</p> <p>P: Yeah</p> <p>J: A hundred percent I'm very confident on that. That all goes to pieces when its real life and you actually love somebody.</p> <p>P: mmm. So do you still use certain labels to describe yourself? And if so what would they be? To describe your identity or...</p> <p>J: Yeah, so in terms of sexuality the label that I use is queer. I think that it is the one that applies most correctly to me because Gay was something that fitted really well</p> | <p>Use of queer to describe identity (as a default with none other applies)</p> |
| <p>Concern about invalidating</p> | | |

| | | |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <p>partner's identity, even though she did not say this was an issue.</p> <p>How he understand his identity now. Importance placed on describing identity accurately to describe himself and his relationship.</p> <p>Surprise at how things ended up.</p> | <p>for a long time and even after my wife, well my partner at the time came out to me and was transitioning, she was fine with it, she said me doing this and being who I am doesn't change who you are. She was perfectly comfortable with me maintaining my identity as a gay man. Which I did at first but after a while it didn't feel (pause) correct anymore. In part cause I feel identifying as a Gay man would still invalidate her in at least some way. Even if she is fine with it and says "don't worry about it, its okay". It still feels wrong for me to say that "I'm a gay man, here's my wife, or here's my girlfriend, these words contradict each other in a way that started to make me feel uncomfortable. And beyond that it wasn't just for her benefit or that discomfort. It was sort of like well I've always thought of myself as a gay man and you know I definitely couldn't be with a women but here I am</p> | <p>Being partner focused, (putting their identity first).</p> <p>Making sense (of the situation and how it happened)</p> |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|

Appendix-9 Table of Superordinate Themes

e.g. – interview 1 Jacob

Theme 1: Context specific Loss/Sense of Bereavement

| Emergent Theme | Keywords/quote | Page/line |
|----------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------|------------|
| Loss of previous sexual identity label | Identity wrapped up in being a gay man, put stock in those words | 2:41-42 |
| Loss of easy way to describe oneself | Quick piece of information that I could drop | 2:45-46 |
| Loss of previous way of interacting | Creates weird barriers with people | 4:155-156 |
| Loss of ways of relating with women | Layer of distance, don't have the safety net of it's alright I'm gay | 8:321-327 |
| Loss of community reference | Can't really authentically go there, and be a part of that community | 10:294-395 |

Theme 2: Making Sense

| Emergent Theme | Keywords | Page/line |
|------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------|
| The mystery solved | was odd to me, when came out weird stuff make A lot more sense | 5:187-191 |
| Adapting to the news | Panicked, lost tether, figure out and navigate that world together | 11:455-462 |
| Uncertainty Doubt | Immediately placed in, position everything different than I thought, Different Future | 11:459-461 |
| Making sense of own identity | bargaining own identity and self, wondering, worrying, had to be firm with myself | 11:467-470 |

Theme 3: Finding a Way to Cope

| Emergent Theme | Keywords | Page/line |
|-------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------|
| Simplifying choices | Choice model, Fork in the road, think about today, pick your life | 6:253-262 |
| Seeking connection | Started blogging, writing into the void, connection points missing, no one talking about it | 13:556-565 |
| Falling into default patterns | Being a helper, default behaviour, Fortunate, bunch of tasks | 10:428-4.30 |
| Finding hope | Finding people that had that experience, knowing they existed, seeing that their relationship succeeded | 13:366-568 |

Theme 4: Seeing Through a Broader Lens

| Emergent Themes | Keywords | Page/line |
|-------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------|
| Increased empathy towards others | able to experience what they are going through | 1:30 |
| Opening up to others and their opinions 1:39 | more open to alternative view points and ideas | 1:39 |
| More open to different situations | more open to situations where friends are dating someone new | 3:135-136 |
| Less judgemental | Judged others quickly, now more open | 3:134-135 |
| Looking through a broader lens | more will to step back and look at it with a broader lens | 3:137-138 |
| Broadening concept of Queer | Before queer felt like a younger than me group of people | 3:14-115 |
| Broadening view of sex | Before her easy, straight forward task, intimate in a lot of ways | 5:194-199 |

Theme 5: Renegotiating sexual identity or discovering attractions that were repressed

| Emergent Themes | Keywords | Page/line |
|----------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------|
| Unexpected Identity | I could never be with someone who is trans. I would think "oh that's a women" I'm a Gay man, all goes to pieces when it's real life, but here I am. | 2:76-2:79 |
| Use of Queer | The label I use is Queer, applies most correctly, room for grey area, Sliding back on Kinsley scale, where I sit a lot queer is kind of the sand that is poured over all those individual letters | 3:83-97 |
| Putting partner's identity first | I feel identifying as a Gay man would still invalidate her in at least some way, even though she says it's okay, words contradict | 3:88-91 |

Theme 6: Embracing the Benefits

| Emergent Themes | Keywords | Page/line |
|----------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------|
| Living in the moment | When you roll that tape forward, prepare for every scenario, Taxing, so much easier to just live life, appreciate today move forward | 7:275-282 |
| Better communication | Had to create a much more open environment, created honesty Couldn't just relax on how we had communicated before | 11:434-436 |

| | | |
|----------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------|
| Increased relationship closeness | More able to understand each other, if she hadn't come out don't think that we would have lasted, huge impact | 11:444-466 |
|----------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------|

Theme 7: Cultural Influence

| Emergent Themes | Keywords | Page/line |
|---------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------|
| Culture as catalyst | trans representation in culture, lucky coincidence for us, Cultural tipping point, Laverne Cox, Caitlyn Jenner, entry point | 6:223-228 |
| Doubled edged Sword | hindered in lots of ways, backlash, go for the jugular, Violent reaction, Double edged sword, extra exposure great | 6.238-245 |

Appendix-10 Developing Themes

Example Emerging Theme across Participants

Theme 6: Embracing the benefits

Jacob

“For me the biggest benefit is was a reduction in anxiety because when you roll that tape forward and you try and plan for every to prepare for every scenario, or pitfall, or everything that could go wrong, it is so taxing to think about these things cause there are so many things that you can’t plan for and so in day to day situation I will still do that, in situation where I think I have enough information to gather about to make those decisions and think about them in that future context but I know now that I don’t have to do that and its so much easier to just live life. I mean not irresponsibly so, that you don’t think about the consequences or what’s going to happen tomorrow but its nice to know that I have the ability to look at what’s happening now and enjoy that and live in it and appreciate it as it is today and just move forward” (274).

“It created a lot of honesty, that we had to create especially just after she came out, we had to create a much more open environment for how we communicated with each other, we had to check in a lot more we could just relax and rest on how we interacted before because she had been hiding a lot from me” (434).

Sam

“I mean before I had a fear that if I tried really hard to find someone for a relationship and this still didn’t happen, that this would be worse somehow than not trying hard, as if I didn’t try hard then there was still hope, cause maybe I could just try harder and I would get what I want. But now a bigger regret would be not trying and therefore not knowing. So I feel that as a plus point it has pushed me to do this, to make the most of my time and not waste it” (216).

“It allows gay men to be freer to express themselves in new ways, as men more so than women seem to be pigeoned holed in society either as gay or straight and nothing in-

between, so it is maybe hard for gay men to suddenly have sex with a women, to go against their person grain and that of their community, whereas female sexuality seems more fluid . It's helped me see that I can do that (253).

David

“when you go through something that tests you and tests your identity that tests your relationship and you come out on the other side still smiling, it's bound to be a benefit. I'd say that it strengthens the relationship even more” (83).

“I mean I always felt that me and Rob had a very egalitarian and not characterised as I've said before not by typical gender roles. Still the more I gave to see Rob as another guy the more I was freed from feeling that I had to take on typical male roles in the relationship (.....) we were both ideally willing to drop sexual stereotypes or gender stereotypes but once the transition happened that became easier. It became easier in the way that we deal with each other, friends, with other people and the outside world” (....)so suddenly to be free of needing to be someone else's idea of what a guy was or how two people should relate to each other, it's freeing” (98).

Eric

“Well previously as I said I was very conservative and closed minded about things, you know just the concept of gender to me fell under the false dichotomy of black and white, (...) Tyler's helped me learn more so about how gender works, how less constant it is and how it is more fluid, more so the individual's identity, its allowed me to express myself a lot more, you know, personally, you could say effeminately I've started to like paint my nails and just exploring a side of myself that I had repressed for a while, you could say” (18).

“I have a lot better understanding realisation of people's emotions and positions in volatile situations, I also feel like I have much better understanding of how love in relationships work. I feel like I have been blind the whole time. But now that the blind fold is off its like oh it's so simple but it's funny how I didn't understand it earlier but he's helped me understand that” (208).

Philip

“I think I understand myself better, I think I’m also not as ignorant or hurtful as a result of it, because given my upbringing I was very much girls are this way, guys are that way and seeing people who don’t fit that stereotypical mould of what a girl is or a guy is.. I feel for one was very beneficial for me I don’t feel obliged to be that toxic masculinity kind of thing and allowed me to not perpetuate that stereotype on others (...) Personally I love getting away from it, its very nice not to be the feelingless, strong man that you picture when you think of a stereotypical guy and its very freeing for me” (100).

“I think I’ve always been very much of a.. very expressive guy and I think that there is something very freeing to realise that I don’t have to hide that, I don’t have to wear bland clothing, I don’t have to bland and buff and everything” (116).

Murray

“Before he came out and started transitioning, it was like I only married to sixty percent of him, and the more he came out and transitioned the better we get along. I mean he became more confident and aggressive once he started testosterone which shook things up a bit but it was ultimately good for him to have more of a voice in our relationship. There were good things about him getting top surgery too. Like he’s always enjoy swimming, and running but he didn’t do them for a long time due to the dysphoria. So it was great seeing him doing them again” (220).

“I can tell you when my partner came out to me our sex life got better because he shared a deep secret. That secret was a huge wall between us. Once that wall came down, he was able to be intimate in a way that wasn’t not possible prior, although this took a lot of negotiating on both of our parts” (227).

Keith

“I mean I’ve always felt more connected to NA than any other community but outside that, the LGBT community is the only other place I have felt part of. (...) Honestly if I hadn’t met Maddox and they hadn’t came out, I wouldn’t have had this weight lifted off my chest and been open about myself and experienced the love and compassion that I’ve experienced with other people and them saying “that okay, that great, it’s great seeing you being okay with yourself” (119).

“Why are certain things considered masculine and certain things feminine? It’s like you like doing what you like, and I like smoking cigars and lifting weights and doing some other things that are considered masculine right but I also as a kid liked to dance, I did jazz and tap until 6 grade but quit, cause I was hiding it from all people from my school and I didn’t want them to think I was gay, right, and it’s silly to think that now, but people understand it was a tough climate, and now I don’t like dance its more, but its like I feel that I’m not held back I don’t have to only like masculine things, like a did a facemask for stuff, for blackheads on your nose, and I don’t need to feel weird about that” (395).

Simon

“I’ve been pleasantly surprised at how much some of the more feminine things my partner has/wears turns me on. Panties, boobs on HRT, soft shaved legs. It’s all just hot. And I get even more turned on by her than ever. Basically, things that make her feel more sexy make her consistently more sexy to me” (357).

“I don’t know that there are many particular benefits to being with a trans woman vs a cis man or woman. I guess the fact that she’s gone through coming out and transition makes me appreciate her keen sense of self. And I did get some decent hand-me-downs once she started purging the guy clothes. But aside from that...I mean, there are tons of benefits of being with her in general, but hardly any relate to her trans-ness” (384).

Tony

“It had been really validating for me. I’ve known for a really long time that I was bi, since I was 18 or 19 but even when you say it... Bi-erasure, I don’t know what’s that like in the UK but it’s a real thing in the United States. Bi people don’t exist, you don’t see them, people are either gay or straight. There is no in-between and I definitely hate that. Having Kendell out has been really validating me as being both Bi and not straight”(173).

“If there is one reason why I continue to perform my gender and don’t adopt something less masculine it’s because the immense privilege that I get the more masculine I present. I feel it it’s a sliding scale, I know that if I present this masculine that I’ll get this much privilege, or that amount and I’ll get that amount of privilege and I’ve definitely played with ramping it up or down. To get the place I’m most comfortable in, where I’m getting the most amount of privilege without feeling like I’m completely beating myself up with the shit

I’m absolutely more aware of it because Kendell’s transition made me more aware of my relationship to my own gender and how to tinker how I presented my gender and that made me more aware of how the privilege is tied closely to how I present” (702).

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