

Experiences of Transgender Couples Navigating One Partner's Transition: Love Is Gender Blind

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Barry L. Motter¹ and Lia Softas-Nall¹ 

Abstract

This study investigated the experiences of romantic couples who maintained their relationship when one partner transitioned gender. For this phenomenological study, 13 couples were interviewed as a dyad and individually. Relationship changes included improved communication skills and language changes, affirming sexual relationships, and redistribution of power within the couple dyad. Benefits of the gender transition included improved relationships overall, emergence of support from communities and loved ones, passing privilege, and improved awareness to social issues. Challenges included losing close relationships, difficulty with remaining patient in transition, and adjusting to new identities such as feeling queer invisibility or a loss of heterosexual privilege. Finally, couples shared that political issues in the current sociopolitical climate had a personal impact on their felt safety and daily lives. Clinical and empirical implications are discussed.

Keywords

transgender couples, transgender, gender transition, love is gender blind

The gender transition process is a systemic and familial experience, as individuals close to trans people are also impacted by gender changes, including romantic partners (Dierckx et al., 2016; Jackson, 2013). It is essential that family and couples counselors who work with transgender individuals and their partners understand the unique challenges and strengths that couples may experience through transition in order to provide competent care and potentially reduce harm experienced by this vulnerable population, often subject to disparate and discriminatory health care (Fowers et al., 2015; James et al., 2016). Without empirical support contributing to counselors' understanding of diverse groups that challenge oppressive majority values of what is "normality," multicultural sensitive practice "risks becoming an empty political value" (Morales & Norcross, 2010, p. 823).

Transgender/Cisgender Relationships

Gender diversity exists across cultures as a normal facet of human diversity (American Psychological Association [APA], 2015), and increased attention has been directed toward transgender individuals through popular media and empirical consideration (Tebbe et al., 2016). Up to 1% of the United States population is estimated to identify as transgender or gender nonconforming (Veldorale-Griffin & Darling, 2016). Although transgender identities are considered normative in the spectrum of human expression (Bockting, 2009), the field of counseling and mental health care has been historically discriminatory and

pathologizing of transgender individuals (Dentice & Dietert, 2015; Dickey et al., 2014; Lev, 2013).

Generally, experiencing affirmation in one's gender identity leads to significant increase in mental health and well-being (Budge et al., 2015; Weyers et al., 2009). Mental health outcomes for trans individuals are also positively associated with relationship satisfaction and the presence of social support (Bockting et al., 2014; Collazo et al., 2013; Dargie et al., 2014). Couples with partners who come out as transgender may maintain their relationships with increased frequency as their resources increase (Erhardt, 2007), and it has been reported that up to half of individuals who were in a romantic relationship at the start of their gender transition stay with the same partner throughout the process (Meier et al., 2013).

Research and Therapy With Transitioning Couples

Transition refers to the time period where a person changes from the gender role associated with assigned birth sex to a differing gender role (Budge et al., 2010). While empirical

¹ Department of Applied Psychology and Counselor Education, University of Northern Colorado, Greeley, CO, USA

Corresponding Author:

Lia Softas-Nall, Department of Applied Psychology and Counselor Education, University of Northern Colorado, Greeley, CO 80639, USA.
Email: basilia.softas-nall@unco.edu

attention is increasing on transgender issues (Singh, 2016a), a meta-analysis found that only .0008% of empirical literature related to couples and family therapy topics concentrated on transgender populations (Blumer et al., 2012). This is consistent with research which suggests that training programs do not adequately address concerns related to understanding transgender issues for psychotherapy and treatment (Korell & Lorah, 2007; Singh & Dickey, 2016). Counselors report feeling a lack of competency to meet the needs of trans clients and their loved ones (Jaffee et al., 2016). Research has generally focused on trans individuals in relationships and minimized the experiences of cisgender partners (Chapman & Caldwell, 2012; Chase, 2011) who are also impacted by their partner's transition (Chase, 2011; Dierckx et al., 2016; Levitt & Ippolito, 2014). Discrimination by health care professionals as well as greater society has led to significant distress among trans individuals and their loved ones (James et al., 2016). This distress is often focused on relationship status and perceived stigma of being in a transgender relationship (Barr et al., 2016; Chapman & Caldwell, 2012; Giammattei, 2015). Without a clear understanding of the issues impacting transgender couples, counselors are more likely to use microaggressive behaviors (Austin, 2016; McLemore, 2016) or display discrimination and prejudice (Lindroth, 2016) toward trans clients. Therefore, it is necessary for additional research to examine issues relevant to transgender couples in order to directly inform treatment needs with this population and ensure effective, ethically aware, and multiculturally sensitive care guidelines for family and couples counselors (Wendt et al., 2015a).

Previous literature suggests that there is a need to examine the gender transition process for preexisting coupleships between trans and cisgender partners (Meier et al., 2013). The purpose of this study was to contribute to literature to better understand the experiences of transgender couples, to assist in increasing the competency of family counselors and other mental health professionals working with transgender couples when one is transitioning; and furthermore to expand opportunities for applied allyship between family and couples counselors and the trans community given the benefit of utilizing professional support on positive coping for transgender individuals (Budge et al., 2017). Additionally, there is greater need for strengths-based research with trans communities that illustrate factors of resiliency, not just challenges (Budge et al., 2017; Dickey et al., 2016; Singh, 2016b; Tebbe et al., 2016). The research questions included: How do transgender couples who navigate one partner's gender transition within the context of their relationship experience the transition? How do transgender couples who stay together as they navigate the gender transition of one partner experience strengths? How do transgender couples who stay together as they navigate the gender transition of one partner experience challenges?

Method

For this phenomenological study, a constructivist theory was used. Consistent with constructivist theories, we aimed to

explore how each partner in a transgender couple individually experienced the transition process, as well as to systemically understand the shared experience of transition within a relationship, as all versions of this reality are equally valid (Haverkamp & Young, 2007). We anticipated that the meaning each partner created of the gender transition would have commonalities and differences (Morrow, 2007) and also believed that the couple system would impact the creation of meaning for the couple as a unit (Bateson, 1972). Use of a phenomenological design as outlined by Moustakas (1994) enabled us to explore the lived experience of gender transition within couple units and continue to honor each couples' experience as equally valid (Dahl & Boss, 2005). By capturing the essence of participant lived experiences and emphasizing their stories in data analysis, a greater attribution of empowerment and liberatory research focus could be granted for the participants directly (Singh, 2016a, 2016b; Singh & Dickey, 2016; Tebbe & Budge, 2016; Tebbe et al., 2016). Qualitative research studies are also well suited for topics related to social justice with applications in social justice areas (Wendt et al., 2015a, 2015b; Yeh & Inman, 2007) and have been particularly recommended for use with trans populations (Gleason et al., 2016; Singh, 2016b; Singh & Dickey, 2016; Tebbe et al., 2016).

Participants

Upon institutional review board approval, participants were recruited using several methods to diversify the representation of couples' makeup (Tebbe & Budge, 2016). First, community organizations specializing in transgender support and care were contacted via a common recruitment letter. Second, professional contacts providing clinical support to trans clients were sent the same letter. This letter was also made available in Jpeg version for distribution via social media, per the request of some community agencies and contacted individuals. Finally, snowball sampling was used as participants shared recruitment information with friends in the community (Merriam, 2009). The use of diverse sampling methods also helped protect confidentiality of participants, given their relatively small numbers. All participants were screened for participatory criteria, which included the following: (a) participants were currently in a coupled committed relationship where (i) one partner identified as transgender and (ii) one partner identified as cisgender; (b) the transgender partner was currently out to most people as their affirmed gender living "full time" (Coleman et al., 2012); (c) participants were in a relationship at least 2 years total to ensure significantly shared history (Bystydzienski, 2011); (d) participants were in a subjectively committed relationship for at least 6 months before the trans partner came out; and (e) both participants were over age 18.

Saturation was reached after interviewing nine couples, and four additional couples were interviewed for redundancy of themes and diversity of sample representation, leading to a total of 13 couples (26 individuals) as participants (Ponterotto & Grieger, 2007).

Participant ages ranged from 25 to 66 years old ($M = 41.7$ years). Among the 13 cisgender participants, two identified as men and 11 identified as women. Among the 13 transgender participants, one identified as agender, four identified as transgender women, and eight identified as transgender men, consistent with information that some trans women may have greater difficulty in maintaining their romantic relationships in transition than trans men (Dierckx et al., 2016). Relationship durations were from 2 years, 5 months to 28 years, 9 months ($M = 12.4$ years). Couples were together on average 7.5 years before the trans partner came out to the cis partner, ranging from 1 year to 23 years, 8 months. Trans partners had been living full time on average 3.4 years, ranging from 6 months and 8 years, 6 months.

Data Collection Procedures

Data were collected through semistructured interviews conducted either in person or over Skype in order to increase accessibility and sample diversity (Tebbe & Budge, 2016). Field notes recorded in a research journal were also used for data. First, participants completed a brief demographics questionnaire. Dyadic interviews took place next (Blumstein & Schwarz, 1983), lasting between 80 and 120 min in length in which couples were asked to tell the story of their relationship, navigating the gender transition, and additional questions relating to the research questions. Couple members were then interviewed individually regarding their individual interpretation of the transition experience and emotional reactions. This facilitated a greater depth to the researcher's understanding of the phenomenon in question (Eisikovits & Koren, 2010). All interviews were audio recorded on a digital handheld recorder.

Data Analysis

Interviews were transcribed verbatim based on audio recordings in order to gain "intimate familiarity" (Merriam, 2009, p. 110) with the data. Dyadic interview analysis (Eisikovits & Koren, 2010) was done to create a rich description of each couple's experience based on their interviews, as well as to identify the similarities between each participant and their couple system. We pulled out significant statements within the narratives for each couple through horizontalization and compared the three versions of the narratives against one another. Common elements were considered to be consistent with one another, and areas in which their stories differed were considered discrepancies or alternatives. The significant statements were laid out to tell a complete story that appeared to capture the narrative each couple shared. Statements were then clustered together into groups based on similar meanings or emotions. Then, clusters were grouped together into larger groups until they appeared to capture the larger "theme." This process was documented and discussed with a qualitatively trained peer reviewer. Structural and textural descriptions were provided to deepen the meanings participants communicated and to

understand the discrepant experiences and rich emotional content communicated (Denzin, 1989; Ponterotto & Grieger, 2007).

Trustworthiness and Credibility

Numerous steps were taken to strengthen the rigor of this study (Merriam, 2009). Credibility was increased by triangulating the data by using multiple sources of data, including the researcher journal and interviewing the couple together and both partners individually (Eisikovits & Koren, 2010), member checks, peer review, documenting the researcher stance, and using a well-recognized research method. Dependability (Guba & Lincoln, 1989) was kept with an audit trail, the reflexivity of researcher, and examination of data and themes by a qualified peer reviewer (Merriam, 2009). Member checks and multiple interviews within couple systems also helped increase confirmability (Eisikovits & Koren, 2010; Guba & Lincoln, 1989). Finally, transferability was fortified with a thick, rich description of the participants and interviews (Creswell et al., 2007) as well as by eliciting a maximum variation within the sample of participants (Guba & Lincoln, 1989).

Results

In regard to how transgender couples navigate one partner's gender transition within the context of their relationship experience, four themes emerged on how the couples experienced the transition. Specifically, the four themes were Love Is Gender Blind, Relationship Changes Connected to the Transition, Benefits of Transition, and The Political Is Personal. Excerpts from the interviews are included and pseudonyms are used for the participants.

Love Is Gender Blind

Couples felt that overall, the way they loved each other was not connected to their partner's gender identification. Couples discussed that because they were partners in life, they were also partners in the transition. Participants described their commitment to one another as people. Bill exemplified this when he stated "I'm much more invested in my relationship with this person, this intellectual person than this biological person." JB shared something similar, noting that for he and Roberta, "love wasn't about what gender I presented as but it was about who I am as a person." Kim and Shane discussed how they anticipated relationship changes over the duration of their relationship "because she planned to be with me for the rest of our lives. This is just a slightly different change than she was anticipating originally."

Generally, participants felt that their relationships remained consistent before and after transition. As Leah shared, "life didn't change that much, I just called him him instead of her." Evan agreed, stating "the experience of being intimate with someone physically, emotionally, mentally, geographically...that isn't really that different in so many ways."

Participants also reported that the qualities that attracted them to their partners originally remained consistent across gender presentations. Kim said, "I love Shane, and the wrapping is just details." Leah also pithily reported, "I didn't date his genitalia, you know what I mean? It's his personality." JB described feeling seen as his whole person with Roberta. He recalled, "I found somebody who's so open and understanding and understands that love is more than the gender and genitalia that you have, that my transition didn't change who I am." Most couples felt that they were as satisfied as before or more satisfied having transitioned genders. Madelyn disclosed,

Prior to transitioning I always had one foot out the door, I was never comfortable because I couldn't be satisfied with anything . . . sometimes I just have to stop and really appreciate that I no longer have that sense of something missing, that I feel pulled, not a whole whenever I'm doing something, whatever I'm pursuing.

One couple, Mia and Sandy, shared that they were now less satisfied as a direct result of transition. Mia struggled in particular, expressing "I didn't want to see the person I love turn into someone else . . . the more she became Sandy, the less happy I was."

Couples discussed other facets of their lives that occurred either in conjunction with transition or separately were more difficult to cope with than the transition alone. One couple lost a child and other couples created new blended families. Other couples struggled with financial difficulties or career changes. Jasmine stated, "in general I don't think it has anything to do with the transition." Evan discussed that while transitioning genders was difficult for him, many other facets were related.

I don't know how much that has to do with gender. See, that's the other confusing thing, it's like which parts have to do with gender? Which parts have to do with being visible versus not being visible? Which parts have to do with just the craziness that any kind of massive change brings to heart? And which is like, a concoction of all these little different things and it's, I don't know, it's hard to know what is related to what sometimes.

Overall, the relationships of transgender couples in this study appeared to be much stronger than any difficulty that gender transition may have presented.

Relationship Changes Connected to Transition

Couples noted that while their connection to one another remained consistent, other facets of their relationship changed with transition. Changes arose related to *language and communication*. Couples felt that there was increased honesty and openness with one another as a direct result of transition. Madelyn shared that transition helped her be "really extremely open" with Sara for the first time. Sue and Anne discussed that honesty was a mutual process.

Sue: I suppose after my own mind, she's probably the next closest process with feedback and information that I have for contemplating things and figuring things out. So I always feel that she is there for me, and hope she feels I'm there for her, as we start to talk about things. So that process is just, I don't have a lot of, or maybe any hesitation in sharing things with her life that. And I want to be open and honest with her as she is open and honest with me with it.

Couples learned to *compromise* through communicating with one another. Audrey felt that part of how she and Lyn made it through their differences in opinions was making "lots and lots of compromises." By having open conversations, partners could learn to understand where each person was coming from and empathize with their needs and goals for transition. Leah and Cole discussed this related to Cole's time line for top surgery.

Cole: So like top surgery for example . . . most of them said you have to wait a year. And me, I'm like no, fuck that I'm not doing that . . . I'm not waiting a year. And then Leah is like, no you need to. And then she was like, and this is why and then explained it and I was like, oh ok that makes sense and the doctor that I want to go to does require the one year. So I was like, okay fine . . . it was more like a discussion, yeah I don't agree with that but let me explain why.

Several couples were also parents together and changed their *parenting language*. Mostly, parents reported that children adjusted quickly to their parents' new gender presentation. Shane and Kim noted that they talk about gender as a construct more concretely with their children than they likely would have had Shane not transitioned. Couples found new labels to define their identities as parents, either in helping their children choose new names to refer to them or in reconceptualizing their internal sense of themselves as parents, like Conor discussed.

It took me a while for my brain when we actually had our own kid to not think in my head that I was Mama again. Like it was really bizarre for me and it was actually kind of really messed with my head . . . like I didn't have this Papa image and this Papa name that I'd ever heard myself be called before so I had to retrain myself . . . I had a hard time resetting. It didn't take a long time, but it took a couple of months to desensitize myself and kind of get myself in this mode where I'm not Mama.

Another significant change for transgender couples was exploring shifts toward *affirming sex*. Most couples shared that their sex lives improved with transition. Madelyn shared, "for the first time in my life I'm actually comfortable with my role in sex and I'm comfortable with my body." Conor and Amy shared that while their sexual behaviors remained consistent, they mostly changed their language for describing body parts or sexual activities to feel more congruent with Conor's gender. Both cisgender and transgender partners appeared to benefit from this change toward affirming sex. Some couples specifically discussed their processes for *rediscovering sexuality* in their relationships. Faye shared that "every single thing" about

sex changed for them and she and Alan had to “relearn how to be together.” Madelyn and Sara also shared that they learned to be “a little creative” in their sex to make both parties feel comfortable. Three couples, all cis women with trans women partners, shared that they have not had sex with each other since transition. Audrey and Lyn shared that because Lyn does not see herself as interested in lesbian sex, and Audrey is uncomfortable with “male-dominant penetrative sex,” they have not figured out what “the answer” of affirming sex looks like for them.

A third change within relationships of transitioning couples was a *redistribution of power*. Sara and Madelyn felt that Sara was now “alpha” within their relationship, which makes her feel “happier in that role.” Madelyn reported that Sara’s change in role also helped her feel “more genuine.” Audrey and Lyn also felt a shift in power, as Audrey recalled that Lyn would sometimes “just defer because I was the man of the house,” which no longer happens. Two couples described that they became more aware of how they engaged in stereotypical behaviors and were working to increase the egalitarianism in their relationship. Evan felt this with Cathasach, sharing that “oh shit, I’m just another manipulated schmuck just like everybody else,” and Cathasach also shared how his biases have influenced their relationship when he said, “I thought I was this, a great feminist and had bucked all these trends and I’m like, wow, no, not hardly at all!”

Benefits of Transition

Couples endorsed a number of specific benefits as a direct result of the gender transition process. Participants reported that transitioning led them to have *better relationships*. As Alan summarized, “I think it enhanced our relationship, just because she finally got all of me. And I was able to give her all of me.” Conor felt that “every step of the process brought” he and Amy closer together. By surviving the transition experience, couples reported increased confidence that they “were going to be able to get through anything,” as Kim stated.

Some couples reported that they now experience benefits related to “*passing privilege*” or the safety they feel because they are “assumed to be” heterosexual in public. Leah shared that she and Cole were now “boring white straight people” who were no longer “cool” but granted them some safety in public. Kash and Jasmine noted that this impacts his ability to work effectively, as he has “the privilege of going stealth” and does not feel safe being out as trans at work.

Participants expressed the benefit they received from the *emergence of support* from others in their lives, expected or unexpected. Leah felt that “people came out of the woodwork” to support Cole publicly. Couples felt it was essential to have a strong community and support network, such as transgender support groups or “Wives’ clubs” for partners. For couples who received explicit support at work, that also seemed to make a difference in the success of their overall transition.

A final benefit that participants described was improved *social and self-awareness*, particularly to the transgender

community as a whole. Anne felt going through transition with her partner allowed her to “gain acceptance . . . on many levels.” Leah agreed that she has learned a great deal about the gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) communities as a whole, noting, “a lot of this has really just opened my eyes.” Alan shared that now having “male privilege” makes him feel more sensitive to social dynamics related to privilege and power related to gender as a whole. Kim shared her appreciation for getting to “experience so many different sides of life” accompanying Shane in his transition that made her feel “sympathetic to other people” more so than she was previously.

The Political Is Personal

Due to the interviews being conducted around the time of the 2016 presidential election, many participants shared how political decisions directly impact their daily lives. Couples directly discussed that *election results* were a significant challenge in their lives. Audrey noted that for her, “the hardest thing presently is the political climate.” JB expressed fear that if the election “turns out one way,” he would “suddenly become someone who has to carry papers or has to live in an internment camp.” Anne and Sue shared that after the election, they felt “afraid” of what would happen to their community and their physical safety. As Jasmine stated, “it is really scary and unfortunately for us it’s just our reality.”

Because of a lack of legal protection for the trans community, couples reported *physical safety concerns*. Anne described being “concerned about violence” from others in public. Cathasach and Evan reported a situation where they were “attacked on the train” for being out as trans. Alan also expressed fear for his family members being associated with him, noting “I don’t want to put them in any kind of danger because of my status.” Couples have adjusted how they act in public with each other, and often cis partners described being responsible for being on lookout or advocating for their partners if needed.

Couples reported feeling that *gendered language* has changed their identities in a political context. For example, JB described that he has changed the way he defines his sexual orientation in a “political way” by using the term pansexual rather than bisexual “to make sure that everybody who hears me . . . think about the idea that there are lots of genders, not just two genders.” Similarly, Amy struggled with the “academic” context of the word “queer” and adopting it for her personal identity. Couples also described that *increased media* attention to transgender figures has impacted the greater social awareness of trans issues. Leah described this as the “Caitlyn Jenner factor,” which has increased the ease with which the greater public can discuss transgender issues.

Couples who stayed together through gender transition exhibited a number of strengths, both personally and within their relationship. Participants reported that these strengths directly contributed to the success of their relationship maintenance. Specifically, the strengths included unconditional positive regard, nonjudgmental acceptance, assertive advocacy,

commitment and security, respect, perseverance, friendship, flexibility, honest listening, humor, and sexual fluidity.

Unconditional Love

Nearly every couple reported that their love for one another was responsible for what kept them together in transition. Anne noted “Sue has always made me feel like the most loved person in the world, and that’s what I was not willing to give up.” Conor felt Amy’s love in her commitment to his transition, stating “I felt like it was definitely just 100% we really do love each other for who we are.” JB and Roberta discussed knowing that “love is something that can conquer anything,” including any challenges gender transition may introduce.

Nonjudgmental Acceptance

Couples discussed that as the transition occurred, they still felt honest and authentic in their ability to accept each other as people. Sara stated that genuine acceptance “definitely is what has got us through. This is me, this is who I am, and other structures don’t matter.” Conor agreed with this idea in his relationship with Amy, saying “I know that I can say anything to her and she’s not going to judge me and I feel like she probably knows the same.” Some partners noted how attractive acceptance was in their significant others, which partners appreciated. Shane felt that “Kim is very accepting of pretty much everybody. There’s nobody that she won’t give a chance to.” This helped him feel safe to explore within their relationship.

Assertive Advocacy

Some cisgender partners described their ability to use privilege in order to support their partners through the transition processes and stand up for them to others. Although this is challenging sometimes, Mia shared “it’s never exhausting when you’re trying to save people you love from people that hate them.” Trans partners expressed sincere gratitude for advocacy efforts from their partners. Alan shared of Faye that “she’s like the biggest advocator . . . she doesn’t take no for an answer from anybody.”

Commitment and Security

Couples discussed that they felt a strong sense of commitment to their relationship and to their partner, as well as a sense of security in their partner’s unwavering support. Trans partners felt secure that their partners would continue to love them in their different gender presentation. Shane shared “it’s nice to have almost a rock, somebody you know is going to be there that does support you.” KC agreed, sharing that “you know you’ve got someone in your corner has just been super empowering and super comforting and just really safe.” Cis partners also experienced this sense of loyalty. Faye felt this support was mutual, stating “we could do anything. We can walk through any problem.”

Respect

Sharing respect for one another and the relationship as a whole served as another strength for transitioning couples. Conor noted that he and Amy share “a kind of understanding or a mutual respect” that helps them address any challenges that may arise. Audrey felt this has been consistent throughout their relationship and pivotal for their overall success as a couple.

I think we have both always had a very deep respect for each other. For our abilities and for our successes . . . so I think the fact that we were always each other’s biggest fans probably has a lot to do with us saying together. Part of that respect was I think that we gave each other space to be ourselves. And I think part of it was that we both truly cared about each other’s happiness.

Perseverance

Couples displayed perseverance in order to persist through challenges and make their relationship work. While two couples described themselves as “stubborn,” others felt that they were “determined to make it work,” like Roberta and JB. Sara also shared she “wasn’t going to give up, I wasn’t going to let her go . . . no matter what, I’m staying. I’m here, I’m here for this relationship.” Intentional efforts and dedication to making relationships work proved successful for the interviewed couples.

Friendship

Some couples directly credited their strong friendship with one another as a relationship strength that kept them together. Mia recalled advice she had been given to “marry your best friend, because sometimes in the end that’s all you have left.” Audrey also felt that she and Lyn had based their romantic relationship “on a very strong friendship to begin with.” Sara shared how her relationship with Madelyn has evolved to an even closer friendship.

One time Madelyn asked me what’s the difference between my relationship with her and like my best friend besides the sex. And I said, but that is what it’s like, being with someone is that you are with your best friend . . . you’re somebody I want to be around all the time.

By maintaining investment in their relationship as friends, couples could continue to support each other’s needs and wishes through the gender transition process.

Flexibility

Couples described that having an ability to be flexible and adjust to changes over time helped facilitate their relationship in transition. Kim felt that “adaptability and flexibility” were two of her greatest personal strengths, joking “it really is true that that helps you out no matter what it is you’re trying to

overcome in life.” Mia described that for her flexibility meant learning to “let things go.” She shared that “there’s important things and there’s not important things. And most things are not important.” Remaining open to potential changes helped couples adjust to transition overall.

Honest Listening

Couples shared that listening openly was also instrumental to successful relationships. Veronica felt that it was “literally the most important thing” for her and KC. Shane recalled that it was important to remain objective as a listener. He shared, “being able to hear her perspective without getting emotional or upset, that kind of stuff I think does help a little bit because she’s able to vent too then or discuss her problems.” Cole experienced the other side of this and noted that would not have been possible to get through transition without Leah as someone to “give my most vulnerable secrets to.” Both listening to partners and being listened to were shared to be important.

Humor

Nearly every couple noted that sharing a sense of humor was vital to their relationship’s success. Amy went so far as to describe laughter as “one of the key glues for us” in addressing challenges in transition and the rest of life circumstances. Audrey and Lyn used humor to work through difficult relational adjustments and shared a story of Lyn moving from being a “cougar” to having “a trophy wife” in Audrey, which they found hilarious. Couples used humor as a healthy coping mechanism as well as a way to strengthen connections to one another.

Sexual Fluidity

Most of the cisgender participants in this study identified as nonheterosexual, and both cis and trans partners felt that this was helpful for their relationship overall. Cathasach noted that he was comfortable with Evan as a man in part because he identified as bisexual. Kim summarized her sexual fluidity as a strength for her and potential as a difficulty for heterosexual individuals.

I joke about that my lack of sexual preference probably helped because I didn’t have to care in that sense . . . Sexually it doesn’t bother me at all, that certainly helped . . . I think it’s much harder for the people who are in a heterosexual relationship and are used to that and then transition to the situation where they’re not that, you know, norm anymore when they go out, I think it’s much harder for them.

The results also addressed specific challenges couples experienced related to transitioning while in a relationship. Specifically, challenges included loss, patience, changing identities, differences in experiences, and finding affirming professional care.

Loss

Many participants reported they lost relationships with people who were close to them because of the transition experience. JB and Roberta experienced discrimination from Roberta’s mother to the extent that they had not told her they were married. Madelyn disclosed that with her family, she’s “not accepted that way . . . I may be tolerated but I’m not accepted.” Sara’s grandmother has told Sara “when she passes Madelyn is not invited to her memorial.” Shane summarized how painful rejection can be, noting “my personality hasn’t changed that much, which means that you’re just looking at the outside and deciding you no longer want anything to do with that and that’s hard to take.”

Three cisgender partners of trans women felt loss and grief related to their partner’s masculine identity. Audrey recalled Lyn telling her, “I feel like someone’s died. She says, I can see you, but I feel like you’ve died.” Sara discussed this difference in her perception and Madelyn’s, noting “I’m losing somebody that I loved even if it was somebody that she hated.” Audrey also felt grief and “mourning for myself that the part of me that had always been the outward façade, the part of me that had hidden me and protected me was going away.”

Some couples described that losing loved ones made them feel closer to one another. Veronica and KC reported that experiencing rejection “brings us together.” Similarly, Madelyn also felt that “we both have that in the back of our heads now that this is what we’ve got.” Others felt that their experiences of being transgender were minimized and misunderstood. Conor and Kim both discussed that their families are more supportive of them now because they are “passing straight . . . not because you really necessarily accept me for who I am.” Additionally, couples discussed feeling loss of their queer communities. Amy and Conor felt that “lesbians were not as welcoming” to them now that Conor was out as trans.

Patience

Couples discussed difficulty with remaining patient with the various time lines associated with transition. Alan described that once he had decided to come out, he struggled when he was not accepted by others.

It’s like once you open that up, it makes it so much harder to live in the world . . . wanting people to identify me as how I was feeling but yet not looking that way on the outside. And it’s just really hard. That piece of it I think is in the beginning is really scary.

Within partnerships, coping with impatience was difficult. Sue shared that her “patience with waiting became a little bit hard for her to deal with,” as she and Anne had different ideas about the time line for moving forward with transition steps. Leah and Cole expressed frustration with time lines being “out of my control” due to medical regulations set by identified doctors. Others shared that “not knowing” how community members and family members would react was also a struggle. These time lines were navigated together, and both partners

often described the difficulty of remaining in limbo before moving forward with transition steps, such as taking hormones or having surgery.

Misgendering was also a struggle for couples to cope with, particularly while in the midst of transition steps or beginning hormones. Misgendering was reported in public, with family members, with friends, and in employment. Cole shared his perception of how misgendering was hurtful for him and how it was sometimes hard for Leah to understand that.

I know some people are like, oh they're stupid and that would make them feel better, or maybe not, I don't know. But for me it's like, that's not the point. Like the point is that it's not because they're stupid, it's not because they don't understand, it's just that like to them I looked female and that's what still hurts. Because I hate that.

Even participants who felt they were sufficiently "passing" expressed persistent anxiety and uncertainty. Alan shared that he was confused about why he "still struggle[s] with that fear of people thinking that I'm female or having someone misgender me," and Faye shared that it was difficult for her to relate to his anxiety, as she thought they had passed that point in time.

Couples reported that being patient while "betwixt and between" among the adolescent phase of transition was also challenging. Cole noted it was "awkward" to be "in-between where I feel like I haven't transitioned fully by any means." Sandy and Alan experienced the adolescent period as anxiety-provoking. The "teenage phase" of transition was also reported to be highly taxing for partners, exemplified by Audrey and Lyn's exchange.

Audrey: I think anyone who comes out goes through a juvenile phase. I was the teenage daughter that Lyn never wanted.

Lyn: Oh definitely . . . it is like having a teenage daughter in the house. The clothes are around, the makeup's everywhere, this exaggerated mannerisms, the drama, never having been a parent, but I've been around kids with friends with kids this age and I remember when I was that age and it just ain't pretty and it just was the most exasperating experience I think I have ever been through.

Ultimately, couples discussed how important it was for relationship success to be able to move through this time rather than "get stuck at sort of the teenage years," to allow for refocusing on the relationship rather than transition itself.

Within some couples, cisgender partners felt "left behind" as their trans partners directed their attention to transition. Lyn shared that "in many respects I had to be left behind on part of this. I wasn't trans. I could be a part of that community as a spouse . . . I knew it could be a part of my life but not all of my life." Sara shared that while Madelyn was changing, she was not "going through that" in the same way and felt her identity remained consistent while her partner changed. This presented strong challenges as couples attempted to stay connected with different interpretations and reactions to transition changes. Audrey noted that "I was celebrating these little victories and

[Lyn] was watching the man that she loved die. Things that made me happy made her grief stricken." Couples had to be open with one another about their reactions in order to work through them.

Challenges were encountered being patient with coming out. Individually, partners could not come out as trans or as a partner to a trans person without implicating and outing their partners as well, so many transparent conversations had to be held to get on the same page. JB noted that sometimes he and Roberta held different opinions about when and to whom to come out. Amy described how she and Conor held those conversations to reach agreement.

When it is okay, when he feels comfortable, when I feel like I need to come out and is it okay if I out him while I come out? Like what are sort of the, what are the different like comfort levels for all of us so that when life happens and it is important for us to come out or reveal something like what are the situations that both of us would be comfortable?

Within all of these examples, fostering patience and working through this challenge seemed to facilitate couples remaining together despite taxing situations.

Changing Identities

A third challenge arose for couples transitioning gender related to shifts in personal identities. Some couples felt that their labels for defining the relationship changed because of transitioning. JB shared, "What is our label? What is our relationship? We're spouses. But people always want to know, well do you identify as a heterosexual couple now? Did you used to identify as a lesbian couple? And I don't know." This shift can be scary for couples, KC and Veronica shared that this "confusion" was "actually kind of rough" to conceptualize and work through.

Some couples who identified as queer or members of the LGB community felt that they were now "invisible," which was difficult. Kim and Shane felt their invisibility meant they "had lost that community for a while" until they discovered new ways to be connected. Conor described that he "missed feeling like I could be myself" as an out queer person once he "looked like a straight guy with my wife." Cis partners experienced more difficulty with this than trans partners. Amy and Jasmine felt that "going from being very visible, like this butch person and this couple that was clearly gay to suddenly feeling invisible" was a drastic shift. Amy adjusted her presentation to help cope with this. Jasmine noted that asserting her own identity as queer sometimes led to challenges with respecting "who Kash is as a man."

Some couples lost a sense of social privilege once they were out as trans. Madelyn described that "I no longer have white male privilege . . . I didn't realize I would have to learn how to operate in a different way. I didn't realize that was a thing." Sara also felt more fear and worry about Madelyn's safety with that loss of privilege and "security." Yet, for some couples such

as Evan and Cathasach, they felt that losing privilege helped them to be “visibly queer,” leading to more authenticity.

Changing identities also led to couples feeling more fear of discrimination and stigma than before coming out as trans. Sara felt this fear has impacted how she and Madelyn can interact in public.

Well for me it was the stigma of being affectionate in public with a woman. I was terrified for the longest time we would be assaulted or people would confront us . . . I was in a heterosexual relationship and I never had to worry about people harassing us, people insulting us, people putting us down. And now I do.

Faye described that fear is a constant in their lives now, stating, “I think a lot of people, including therapists, don’t realize what it’s like to be constantly in fear of being invalidated, your very existence being questioned.” Coping with discrimination and fear is unfortunately a daily part of the lives of trans couples.

Some couples felt “othered” by their communities and family members because of their trans status. KC noted that othering felt different for them than when they identified as a lesbian, recalling “it’s like lesbians were kind of becoming passé and now we get to be tokenized again.” Cole and Leah shared that he does not want “to wear a transgender flag over his head every day,” which is an important sentiment for trans couples who want to feel belonging as themselves rather than for their gender identity status.

Differences in Experiences

An additional challenge present for transgender couples was the uniqueness of their personal experiences. There were some circumstances that were difficult to relate to when a partner experienced it.

For trans partners, it was challenging to have their cis partners fully comprehend the experience of being transgender and the need for transition. Cole empathized with this, stating “if you’ve never felt like you don’t belong in your own body, how are you supposed to understand what that feels like?” This also came up around sexual changes and sexuality; Madelyn noted that Sara had to “learn how to be secure” in their relationship despite her changes in sexual attraction. Trans partners also shared that they received more benefit from transitioning overall than their partners. Sue stated, “I feel like if you looked at who is making the bigger sacrifice in this marriage, I would say she is by far.” Audrey described feeling “selfish” for how she has benefited from transition despite Lyn’s challenges in adjusting. She stated, “Transition is the most selfish thing I have ever done. I did it for me, not for anyone else, and I did it to some degree regardless of how it affected others.”

Cis partners also experienced challenges their trans partners did not. Veronica struggled to adjust to seeing her partner as a male-bodied person due to her past traumatic experiences with men. Cathasach discussed how difficult it has been for him to adjust the way he sees his partner, Evan, because he will “catch myself thinking of him as a woman and not a man.” Similarly

to trans partners describing feeling that their partners could not understand them, some cis partners felt like they had to stand back and watch their partners struggle with transition without being able to help. Faye noted, “I was just unaware that they’re still a problem.” Cathasach also struggled to empathize with Evan’s emotional reactions and understand “why it really was justified.” Sara stated that especially with loss and discrimination, she feels “horrible” for not being able to “fix her losing” close relationships.

Finding Affirming Professional Care

Couples were challenged to find compassionate care among therapists and other providers. Audrey stated her first experience in counseling related to being trans “was a disaster.” Couples felt that therapists were not knowledgeable about how to help them or held competencies to be able to support them in transition. Some couples described difficulty getting prescriptions and dealing with insurance providers, encountering trans services were “specifically banned” within their level of care. Amy and Conor sought out specific legal guidance from an “expert” in LGBT law and found that this person “really misled us about trans issues.”

Discussion and Implications

As transgender issues gain increasing attention, counselors are more likely to encounter transitioning couples in therapy. The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the experiences of transgender couples who stay together through a gender transition experience, as well as their perceived relational strengths and challenges in transitioning. This study provided direct implications for family and couples counselors working with transgender couples.

Counselors working with transgender couples need to ensure they have competency in trans issues before taking clients on. Many participants expressed their frustration at having to teach their therapists a “basic education” about being transgender. This may be easier to do with the APA (2015) Guidelines for Psychological Practice with Transgender and Gender Nonconforming People, and counselors can also familiarize themselves with World Professional Association for Transgender Health’s (WPATH) Standards of Care (Coleman et al., 2012). Counselors should also remain unconditionally trans positive in their work with couples. This includes using affirming names, pronouns, and sexual orientation labels. Counselors should also be cautious regarding clients’ out status, as that can lead to potentially dangerous situations. For example, Alan was outed at work when insurance papers were faxed to his office without the appropriate cover sheets. Making intentional choices in documentation, filing, and even greeting clients can lead to trans couples feeling more accepted and heard by their therapist.

Some couples felt their therapist was “taking sides” in the process of their counseling due to some transphobic beliefs. Instead, family and couples’ counselors who are educated in

trans issues can help clients address their own internalized transphobia, from both cis and trans partners, and assist in destigmatizing the spectrum of gender diversity. They should be prepared to help clients sit with strong emotions as reactions to transition are processed, which may include grief, loss, or pain. By remaining validating, counselors can help distinguish whether the issue for counseling is related to gender or other facets of identity. Some couples reported that their “transness” was rarely the actual issue but instead was the easily identifiable topic that served as a scapegoat. Piper and Mannino (2008) suggest externalizing the stigma of transness as the problem, which could also be helpful in identifying social influences rather than personal beliefs.

Family and couples’ counselors may need to serve as allies and advocates for transgender couples. They should maintain connections to trans communities or agencies in order to not only continue education but also provide additional support for clients. Legal issues and employment rights may also arise for these couples, particularly for those with children. Counselors can maintain their understanding and be willing to advocate within their scope of competency in this area.

Ultimately, if family and couples’ counselors are willing to consider transition as “just another life change,” they may be able to normalize the process of transition for couples and assist them in processing emotions, reactions, and identities. Erhardt (2007) reported that nonviolent communication was the most important quality for surviving transgender relationships, which any counselor would be well equipped to guide. By tossing the outdated notion that transition leads to certain relationship dissolution, family and couples’ counselors can continue to assist couples with this presenting concern, as many couples are able to navigate this successfully and grow stronger together in the process.

Implications for Future Research

While this study provided a thorough examination of the experiences of a select group of couples using a qualitative methodology, further research can expand family and couples’ counselors’ understanding of trans issues. Using alternative theoretical frameworks, such as the community participatory action research process outlined by Tebbe and Budge (2016), would likely allow researchers to explore better ways to apply research directly to communities. A longitudinal design might be helpful in examining changes over time related to couples’ success, the impact of transition on later stages of life development, and in assessing whether potential relationship dissolution is connected to transition procedures.

This study used a sample of trans men, trans women, an agender individual, cis men, and cis women. Relational groupings sometimes shared different experiences or challenges that may warrant closer examination or division by couple demographics. For example, cis women/trans women couples experienced changes in sexuality, grief, and connection to the queer community differently than couples of cis women/trans men. Additionally, couples in which both partners identified as trans

or nonbinary were excluded, although some contacted the researcher for participation. It may be helpful to explore how couples with two trans individuals experience their gender changes together. Demographically, nearly all participants in this study were White. More exposure to intersectionality related to race and ethnicity would be important to explore in fully understanding the needs of the trans community.

Finally, it is recommended that future research in this population include greater representation from researchers who identify as trans. While the researcher consulted with experts in conducting transgender research, the researcher’s cisgender identity may have impacted the results.

Conclusion

This study’s results provided implications for the consideration of family and couples counselors working within the transgender community and with transitioning couples to assist in improving one’s ability to advocate for clients as well as practice in a way that is multiculturally sensitive. There were also numerous directions for related future research to expand on this information. Couples who maintain romantic relationships through gender transition demonstrated that joining together in such an experience can ultimately strengthen and improve their relationships and satisfaction overall.


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ORCID iD

Lia Softas-Nall  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5517-9664>

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