The disclosure experiences of male to female transgender individuals:

A systems theory perspective

Maureen C. Smith

Thesis submitted to the faculty of the Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Science
In
Human Development

Eric E. McCollum
Andrea K. Wittenborn
Angela J. Huebner

April 15, 2009
Falls Church, VA

Keywords: systems theory, transgender, coming out, gender disclosure

The disclosure experiences of male to female transgender individuals:

A systems theory perspective

Maureen C. Smith

ABSTRACT

Whereas sex is a classification that is expected to remain consistent and stable over time, gender is more fluid and changes depending on one's culture, within culture, and in relation to the other gender. Our society suggests that all individuals fall neatly into one of two sex and gender categories; however there exists an entire community of individuals who, in fact, do not. Transgender individuals "express their gender in non-traditional ways and find their sense of self as female, male, or other to be in conflict with their assigned gender role" (Burdge, 2007, p.244). Disclosing as transgendered is a process of emergence that is not only an internal psychological process but is also a "relational and systemic dynamic that intimately involves family, friends, loved ones, and all social relationships" (Lev, 2005, p. 11). In this study, the disclosure experiences of male to female transgender individuals as well as the changes and adjustments that occurred in their relationships were explored through individual interviews. Thematic coding was used to analyze the data and identify themes in the disclosure experiences. Considering the experience from a systemic perspective, participants discussed the mutual impact of their disclosure on family, friends, acquaintances as well as greater systems including the medical field, mental health field, and other community agencies.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

The Problem and its Setting

Inevitably, one of the very first labels placed on individuals in every culture and family is one of sex. Children are identified as biologically male or female most often prenatally or seconds after they enter the world. From that moment families construct and predict gender expectations and roles for the new infant. Whereas many people use the words sex and gender interchangeably, these concepts represent two very distinct ideas. Sex is a designation based on genetic and biological factors, external genitalia and internal sex organs that are determined by chromosomes and hormones present in an individual (Wood, 2005). On the other hand, gender is a social and psychological construction that is most commonly based on biological sex and learned through social interactions and the way in which one learns to be masculine or feminine (Wood, 2005). Wood (2005) suggests that whereas sex is a classification that is expected to remain consistent and stable over time, gender is a concept of identification that is more fluid and changes depending on one's culture, overtime within culture, and in relation to the other gender. These labels assigned to infants determine the ways in which the world interacts with the individual and therefore the way that the individual creates a sense of identity in the world. According to Lips (2005), sex and gender cannot be treated as separate and nonrelated concepts, rather it is important to consider the interaction of biology and environment when considering one's sex and gender identification, attitudes and stereotypes.

Whereas one's sex and gender identification seem basic, it is easy to overlook the role that one's sex and gender plays in her or his life. Gender and sex permeate each life even prior to birth through the ways that society and families in particular prepare for a girl or a boy, from the way that rooms are decorated, the clothes that are bought, and names that are picked. More importantly, a baby's sex impacts the way in which the family expects the child to behave, the

characteristics assumed will be present, and often unknowingly shapes the way the family and society responds and interacts with the child. Wood (2005) explains that although the meaning of gender is taught to each individual through social interactions, no one is simply a passive recipient of this information, rather each person makes choices to either accept the cultural prescriptions that are presented to them, to modify, or to reject these expectations and provoke change in the way that one identifies as male, female, or neither. It is through a process that an individual develops her or his gender identity, a term used to signify one's total perception about her or his own gender including basic personal identity as a woman or man, girl or boy (Money, 1955). Gagne, Tewksbury, and McGaughey (1997) argue that gender identity is "learned and achieved at the interactional level, reified at the cultural level, and institutionally enforced via the family, law, religion, politics, economy, medicine, and the media"(p. 479). Gender role, a term tied in with one's gender identity, includes gender as it is perceived by others. Through a combination of clothing, manners, activities, occupation, and sexual orientation an individual creates a gender identity and their perceived gender role. Most individuals are gender congruent, meaning that their sex, gender identity, gender role, and all manifestation of these two concepts are congruous (Bullough, 1997).

Considering the integral role that gender plays in our society, it becomes clear that "individuals cannot not do gender" meaning it is impossible for individual to avoid enacting their gender in some way (Burdge, 2007, p. 246). Our culture's binary gender system creates no room for individuals who do not clearly fit into the categories of female or male. In that case, the question becomes what an individual does if one's gender identity and her or his perceived gender role do not correspond with her or his biological sex. The very existence of the idea that a person's biological sex may not match with her or his gender identity challenges the traditional

gender dichotomy and steps outside the fundamental social norms (Burdge, 2007). In Western society, the expression of alternative forms of gender has been limited within the binary system that exists and those who wish to enact their gender in nontraditional ways often end up redefining their identities in ways that conform to the traditional belief systems and institutional demands (Gange, et al., 1997). Whereas our society would suggest that all individuals fall neatly into the one of the two sex and gender categories, there exists an entire community of individuals who, in fact, do not. Bullough suggests that ten to fifteen percent of the population, depending on how one defines gender non-conformity, fail to conform to the gender binary in some way (1997). Whereas many people deviate from traditional gender norms in the broadest sense in aspects of her or his life, transgender individuals are those that "express their gender in non-traditional ways and find their sense of self as female, male, or other to be in conflict with their assigned gender role" (Burdge, 2007, p.244).

Transgender is an umbrella term that encompasses a variety of identities including bigenders, gender radicals, butch lesbians, cross-dressers (fetish and nonfetishistic), transvestites, intersexed individuals, transsexuals, drag king and queens, gender-blenders, queers, genderqueers, two spirits, he-shes, femmes, ambigendered, and androgynous individuals (Burdge, 2007; Gange, et al., 2007). Transgender is defined as "people who move away from their birth-assigned gender because they feel strongly that they appropriately belong to another gender in which it would be better for them to live" (Stryker, 2008, p. 1). Whereas this community is unique in that it offers an opportunity to reconsider the gender system that for so long has defined our culture, Burdge explains that these gender nonconformists "face the complicated developmental task of building identities in a social environment that invalidates their reality and may even punish them" for stepping out of the gender norms that society grasps

so tightly (2007, p. 244). Throughout the difficult process of gender identity development, transgender individuals are not only struggling to negotiate and accept a comfortable identity but also deciding to who to tell, when to tell them, and how to disclose this private information (Brown & Rounsley, 1996). The disclosure process is one fraught with isolation and fear in regards to potential rejection from family, friends, professional colleagues, and the transgender community at large (Israel, 1996). Whereas there is growing and significant research regarding the lesbian, gay, and bisexual community and their disclosure process, there is limited research focusing on the experiences and processes of the transgender population. The current study sought to examine the experience of transgender individuals who have disclosed their gender identity to at least one other person and the challenges, rewards, and meaning of this disclosure.

Significance

A 2007 study of 1,229 transgender individuals sought to capture the social demographics of the transgender community as compared to the general population in the 2000 United States census. This study found the transgender community identified as younger, White (non-Hispanic) or multiracial, were more educated but reported less household income, were more likely to be single, never married, or divorced, were more likely to report no formal religion, and were less likely to live in major metropolitan areas (Rosser, Oakes, Bockting, & Miner, 2007). Whereas these data and studies show that the transgender population is hard to capture in a snapshot, it also shows that the data we do have regarding the transgender population are illusive and represents the extensive work that needs to be done to understand and meet the needs of this community as a whole.

The transgender population is often lumped together with other sexual minority populations that are often referred to as the Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, and Transgender (GLBT)

community. It is important for individuals addressing the needs of this community to distinguish between gender identity and sexual orientation. Israel (2005) states, "Whereas gender identity is related to an internal sense of who one is with regard to gender (male, female, both, neither), sexual orientation focuses on the gender (same, other, or both) to whom one is attracted" (Israel, 2005, p.16). Transgender individual's internal sense of who they are is different than their assigned sex which is a very different experience and issue than sexual orientation and attraction. Although there seems to be a surge of research regarding the gay, lesbian, and bisexual individuals, there is limited research on transgender individuals and even less research on the ways in which they approach the disclosure and transition process (Reilly, 2007). For these reasons, it was significant for this research to focus on only the transgender community and consider the experiences of transgender individuals as unique from other sexual minorities since this population endures different internal struggles and seems to encounter very different experiences when disclosing.

Whereas gay, lesbian, and bisexual individuals can "come out" to themselves and have partners of their choice, many choose to live discrete lives for personal or professional reasons (Lev, 2005). On the other hand, Lev goes on to say, in a search for a comfortable gender identity, transgender individuals need to "re-make themselves physically and socially in order to express their gendered sense of self" (2005, p. 11). Disclosing as transgendered is a process of emergence that is not only an internal psychological process but is also a "relational and systemic dynamic that intimately involves family, friends, loved ones, and all social relationships" (Lev, 2005, p. 11). Just as it is difficult for individuals who are transgender to find social support, it is also difficult for the families and friends to find social support upon disclosure (Zamboni, 2005). Lesser (1999) found that upon disclosure of a family member being

transgendered, family members may experience shock, horror, betrayal, disbelief, anger, anxiety, and depression. Anticipation of these emotions and experiences adds to the difficulty of individuals being able to express their gender identity and live as they desire. In addition to this initial and possibly permanent emotional chaos, transgendered individuals face rejection not only from family and friends but also from the society as a whole.

The unspecific and far from comprehensive research on the transgender community reflects a population that is hidden in part due to the difficulties in disclosing as transgender. Not only do transgender individuals face the struggle of discovering and expressing who they truly are, but they also endure struggles from a generally unaccepting and judgmental culture. The transgender community has faced an extensive history of violence, high risk behaviors, inexpert health care, and feelings of shame and isolation. In a study of transgender individuals and their non-transgender siblings, transgender individuals perceived less social support from their families of origin and were much more likely to have experienced harassment and discrimination from coworkers, supervisors, strangers, members and leaders of religious communities, leaders of ethnic communities, healthcare providers, and casual acquaintances as compared to their siblings (Factor & Rothblum, 2007). In a 2002 study of 402 transgender individuals, close to 14% reported being raped or someone attempting to rape them, 47% reported being assaulted in their lifetime, 58.5% experienced harassment, 37.1% have experienced economic discrimination (Lombardi, Wilchins, Priesing & Malouf, 2001). The large percentages of this population that are faced with discrimination, violence, and harassment helps explain the risk behaviors that are prevalent in this population including cutting, suicide attempts and suicides, school non-attendance, inappropriately sexualized behavior, risky sex, and substance abuse (Di Ceglie, Freedman, McPherson, & Richardson, 2002; Mason-Schrock, 1996; Scourfield, Roen, &

McDermott, 2008). These risky behaviors with the lack of appropriate mental and physical healthcare leads to, amongst other things, high HIV and STD risks among the transgender population (Bockting, Robinson, Forberg, & Scheltema, 2005).

Since western culture is highly engrossed by the gender dichotomy in this society, transgender individuals face and challenge the basic understanding of being male or female. As the research shows, this is not only an internal struggle but also takes place in the face of fear of rejection from family members and friends as well as discrimination and harassment and feelings that lead to risky and self-destructive behaviors. This research sought to understand the experience of disclosing and the decisions made regarding the disclosure as transgender in a less than accepting society. Understanding these disclosures will also help researchers, clinicians, and leaders in the community to be more apt at providing supportive and helpful systems to ease some of the challenges that disclosing produces.

Rationale

In a qualitative study with from a system's theory perspective, participants who identified as transgender were interviewed about their experiences of disclosing their transgender identity. Systems theory is an appropriate framework for this study due to its focus on the experience of the individual describing the phenomenon within her or his own systemic influences and intimate relationships. As von Bertalanffy stated, "Events seem to involve more than just individual decisions and actions and to be determined more by soci-cultural 'systems,' by these prejudices, ideologies, pressure groups, social trends, growth and decay of civilizations, or what not" (1968, p.8). Interviewing participants from a systems theory perspective allowed for each individual to share her or his experience of disclosure in a language and context that was significant to her or him. It also allowed the research to identify different systems in which the disclosure took place

and the impact of the disclosure on the systems and the system on the disclosure. This research hoped to gain insight into the experience of disclosing as transgender with a richness that is only possible through interviews.

Theoretical Framework

The idea that "people's lives are linked together such that behavior in families becomes a product of mutual influence" is the principle belief in systems theory (Nichols & Schwartz, 2006, p. 61). As therapists and researchers moved from absolute determination to study the individual without the influence of their family, systems theory became the prevalent framework in which therapists could utilize and observe the impact of outside people on the individual and vice versa. By viewing individuals as part of a system and considering the context for which they live and relate, their behavioral interactions and communication patterns are more clearly understood. Nichols and Schwartz (2006) state that observing the family as a system helped therapists see that the behavior of every member of the family is dependent on the behavior of all the others. Systems theory considers individual's behavior in terms of reaction to feedback loops, the definition of her or his role in the family, family rules, dyadic interactions within the system, and extraneous factors in the system like substance abuse, violence, culture, and gender. Systems theory also considers the relation of the family system in terms of the larger system and how the values and expectations of the society and culture as a whole affect the family system.

Systems theory takes into account the principle that the behavior of every member of the system affects all other members in the system. In addition, systems theory states that the properties of an individual arise from the interactions and relationships among the parts of the system. Considering this concept, the patterns of communication and behavioral choices of each individual are part of the interactions and relationships within the system. Using these tenants of

systems theory, the current study sought to consider the experience of disclosing as transgendered within the context of her or his system. As noted previously, families and other members of the system may have their own processes of managing the disclosure which sequentially affects the experience of the disclosure for the transgender individual. Further, systems theory also considers the interaction the individual with the larger, social and cultural system that she or he is apart. Variables within the larger system including peer groups, colleagues, media, church and innumerous other influences also impact the decisions that face the individual. Relating this framework to the present study, the research used the systems theory lens to consider decisions regarding the disclosure as well as any larger, cultural system impacts on the transgender individual's decisions of when and to who to disclose. Systems theory stance of mutual impact and consideration of roles and expectations within the system sets the stage to consider the complexity of a disclosure of a transgender individual.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this phenomenological research was to consider the disclosing transgender individual's experience of the process of disclosing their gender identity. The research considered decisions surrounding the disclosure and the experience of disclosing in a systemic way. This research sought to fill a deficit in past research by doing several things. First, this research focused only on transgender individuals rather than the GLBT sexual minority community as a whole. This decision was made to consider the experience of disclosing one's gender identity as opposed to sexual preference, which may be a significant difference. Secondly, whereas past research has focused on the family's reaction to the disclosure, this research considered the decisions surrounding disclosure and the experience of disclosing in a systemic way. Thirdly, this research also considered the experiences of individuals who have

been unable to disclose to, for example, family members and/or friends but have disclosed to individuals in other systems of which they are a part. By taking into account the experiences of these transgender individuals as well, the research gained a mutual impact perspective of the impact of the system on the experience of disclosing and decisions surrounding the disclosure process. Lastly, the study examined a general understanding of the impact of the larger, cultural system on the individual in addition to their smaller network of family and friends, surrounding the impact it had on the experience of the disclosure process.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

As compared to other minority populations, the transgender community is grossly underrepresented in research as a whole. Whereas research regarding sexual minority groups including the gay, lesbian, and bisexual populations is increasing, the transgender population is often overlooked or lumped in research that may not be relevant to the unique experience of transgenderism (Rosser, et al., 2007). This section will review past research on the gender dichotomy in western culture, the phenomenon of transgenderism, past research done on being a transgender individual and the coming out process within a systems theory perspective, and victimization and risk behaviors of transgender individuals and their families. This study interviewed solely transgender individuals to help dissolve this disparity in past research and identify the experiences and needs of the transgender community that are different than other minority and sexual minority populations. The literature review reflects these intentions, however many research studies still incorporate the transgender population with other sexual minority populations and where appropriate, those studies are also reviewed.

Sex and Gender

As defined earlier, sex is a biological characterization given to newborns, often in vitro, of either girl or boy based on internal and external genital and sexual reproduction organs, as determined by genetic make-up and hormone levels. Sex identification is one of the initial, fundamental concepts children learn and research shows that children can identify as girl or boy between the ages of 18 and 36 months (Meissner, 2005). A person's sex is associated with one's gender, the socially and psychologically constructed idea that refers to the "identities, roles, activities, feelings, and so forth that society associates with being male or female and that we as individuals learn and either internalize or challenge" (Wood, 2005, p.19). Wood goes on to

describe the connection between gender and its cultural context by describing that whereas most people's sex remains constant over time, gender depends on society's values, beliefs and preferred way of organizing life and is promoted by a range of social structures and practices. Institutions such as the family, schools, the law and judicial systems and places of worship are all examples of foundations in which gender expectations are defined, emphasized, and internalized. This internalization of one's gender beliefs is an individual's gender identity, or "the individual's private experience of the self as female or male- a powerful aspect of the self-concept that is formed early in childhood and, in most adults, is extremely resistant to change" (Lips, 2005, p. 69). The concept of gender identity is different than the idea of gender role, which refers to the set of behaviors deemed appropriate by social standards for women versus men. Women and men can experience role strain when the behaviors that are expected of them due to their gender are not congruent with their own unique concept of gender identity. Most commonly, one's sex, gender, gender identity and preferred gender roles all are congruent and whereas they may shift slightly overtime, usually remain consistent and comfortable characterizations of identification.

Both girls and boys growing up are exposed to ideas, attributes, and behaviors that are acceptable and sanctioned for them based on their gender. Parents are the first to gender their children through the child's name, room decorations, clothing, toys, and responses to the child early in life (Kane, 2006). Whereas both boys and girls are taught or shown ways to exhibit their gender in ways that are acceptable in each particular family and culture, there are differences in the range of "acceptable" behaviors for boys and girls. In her research and interviews with parents, Kane (2006) found that parents of girls often celebrate and praise behaviors that they see as "gender non-conforming" (p. 156). Parents of girls highlighted and encouraged behaviors such as playing sports, learning to use tools and rough and tumble play. These parents also minimized

or discouraged their girls from activities like playing with dolls, being fragile, and coloring. The author suggested that this type of gender steering may be more acceptable for girls in childhood but expectations may shift to more traditional expectations near adolescents. Parents of boys in the research responded with much less enthusiasm regarding nonconformity to traditional gender stereotypes. Whereas there was some level of support for teaching boys skills like cooking and cleaning, this acceptance tempered for many parents when their boys associated with iconic feminine play and toys like dolls, tea parties, playing dress up, Barbies, and dance class. Parents of boys also expressed concern about their boys being overly emotional or passive and associated this type of behavior with fears of their sons being homosexual. The findings of less flexible expectations with boys is supported by the demographic characteristics examined in referrals to Gender Identity Development services in which two times more boys than girls are referred to seek gender development services (Di Ceglie, et al., 2002). Also notable is the finding that referrals for girls double at puberty, suggesting that nontraditional behavior under the age of 12 is not distinguished from "tomboyish" in Western culture whereas puberty marks a shift in gender expectations for females.

Whereas these concepts all seem to be a basic characterization of individuals born into this world, the dichotomy of being woman or man, female or male is a structure that marginalizes any individual that does not fit neatly into one or the other category. In western society, the birth of a child with atypical genitals is treated as a social emergency and surgery is often the first response to shape genitals to look more like those of non-intersexed boys or girls (Ehrbar, 2004). Whereas these decisions and the secrecy that often follows within the family have negative physical and psychosocial effects, Western culture does not create a place for individuals who are not unambiguously girls or boys. The concept of a third gender or different

categorization of individuals who are neither male nor female may be treated in Western society as a radical or new concept, however historically and cross- culturally this is not the case. Many societies have created an institutionalized role, third gender or categorization for intersexed or gender variant individuals, for example called the hirjas in India, women-men or men-women in Native American culture, acault in Buddhism, and mahu in Hawaii (Ehrbar, 2004). Some of these institutionalized roles give the gender variant individual higher social or spiritual status and some others designate the opposite, however the acknowledgement of this sub-culture defines space and place in the greater society. The gender dichotomy that exists in Western culture does not acknowledge anything beyond or between man or woman, male or female which constricts individuals from expression of their understood identity (Mason-Schrock, 1996).

Considering this dichotomy that is created from birth for girls and boys to create and express their gender identity, the question emerges of individuals whose gender identity does not fit neatly into one of the categories provided and the path taken by these individuals to find ways of gender expression that are authentic. Since sex and gender are the building blocks on which our world is constructed and organized gender variant individuals, or individuals who live beyond the gender boundaries associated with their gender, may face challenges in finding ways to express their gender identity in addition to the challenges of the family and society in accepting this identity.

Transgenderism

The term transgender is a word that has come into widespread use only in the past couple of decades, first coined in the late 1980's, and whereas its meaning seems to be ever changing, it most often refers to individuals who cross or transition gender boundaries that they were assigned at birth as constructed by their culture to define and contain that gender (Carroll, Gilroy

& Ryan, 2002; Stryker, 2008). This transition or living out of the bounds can occur for people for multiple reasons including the strong feeling and acknowledgement that they belong to another gender or others feel as though they need to get escape from conventional expectations bound to gender. Transgender is an encompassing term for individuals who live as, part time or full time, the other gender or outside general gender boundaries. In the full spectrum of people with non-traditional gender identities are pre- and post- operative transsexuals, cross-dressers, and intersex persons who all fall under the umbrella terms of the transgender based on the expression of their gender identity. A transsexual is a person who transitions and permanently lives as a member of the other gender assisted by hormones and cosmetic surgery. Due to the high financial and emotion costs, more people identify as transsexual than obtain full sex reassignment surgery (Israel, 1996). Cross dressers are individuals who temporarily wear clothing not associated with their given gender to fulfill an inner sense of need or reduce gender related anxiety in a private or public realm. A transgender individual encompassing both of these categorizations, however is unique in that they are interested in maintaining masculine and feminine characteristics to have a sense of balance and their internal needs to not meet the narrow definitions associated with transsexuals or cross dressers. Whereas these definitions and categorizations exist in the culture, transgender individuals adopt a gender-identification based on their needs and experiences to move away from the rigid definitions that predominate in western culture.

Whereas the desire to transition or the desire to express one's gender differently may occur at any life stage, often the stories of transgender individuals indicate that the desire to be the other gender or the feeling that they were "born in the wrong body" start in childhood. In a study of the narratives of transsexual individuals, early memories of feelings of ambivalence about gender, memories of doing gender unconventionally, and viewing childhood as a time

when their authentic impulses and true selves had not yet been stifled by restrictive gender

boundaries were all norms in the transsexual community (Mason-Schrock, 1996). The

implication here is that in Western society body is an unequivocal sign of gender and

transgendered individuals must look beyond their natural bodies for signs of their gendered

character and their true selves. Behaviors, mannerisms, and play that appear to be gender

nonconforming to a parent may feel perfectly normal to a child; however children who deviate

from socially prescribed norms for boys or girls are quickly redirected by parents. In his research

Mason-Schrock (1996) noticed patterns in the narratives of transsexuals including childhood

stories of being different, experimentation with cross dressing including getting caught and

associated shame, painful stories of denial of trans- identity, and identification of resources and

acceptance of a true self. Morgan and Stevens (2008) study of female to male transgendered

adults observed four prominent themes, body-mind dissonance, biding time, missed

opportunities, and the process of transition. The body-mind dissonance theme was marked by

early childhood disconnect between the individual's gender identity and the physical realities of

one's body, pressure to conform to gender norms, and a marked humiliation and repulsion

around the time of puberty. Biding time represented the time period of waiting for the correct

timing and circumstances to transition. During this period the participants resisted gender

conformity, lived a more gender- neutral life and often spent time with different sexual minority

populations and discovering where they were most comfortable. Several participants described

events in which they could have transitioned but missed the opportunity due to individual

concerns or circumstances but all participants reached their "breaking point" and could no longer

continue in a gender with which they did not identify. Each participant went through unique

stages of recognition, acknowledgement, and development of their transgender identity through a

multistage process throughout their lives that was made more difficult by imposed, unwavering gender expectations.

Although gender nonconforming children do not necessarily constitute a transgender child or adult, Western culture promotes children raised in gender bound roles and the family, in addition to other societal institutions, reinforces these bounds. Because parents assume there is a "natural" relationship between sex and gender, children who question their gender identity are labeled and pathologized as "gender dysphoric" and parents or teachers often seek out professional help (Mallon & DeCrescenzo, 2006). The term Gender Identity Disorder (GID) first appeared in the American Psychological Association's Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (3rd Edition) (DSM-III) in 1980 and continues to be a controversial diagnosis within the social sciences fields and the transgender community. Currently in the DSM- IV there are two main components that must be present to make the diagnosis of GID. The two components are one, evidence of a strong and persistent cross-gender identification which is the desire to be, or the insistence that one is the other sex and two, evidence of persistent discomfort about one's assigned sex or a sense of inappropriateness in the gender role of that sex. The descriptive features of this diagnosis reflect a range of behaviors from boys playing with Barbie, girls not wanting to wear dresses to children wishing they had different genitalia. Due to the more rigid gender bounds for boys, five boys for each girl are referred with this disorder and in adult clinical samples men outnumber women by about two to three times (DSM-IV, 2000).

Critiques of this mental disorder diagnosis include misdiagnosis because the DSM criteria do not adequately differentiate children with gender dysphoria with those who express simple gender non-conforming behavior (Wallien & Cohen-Kettenis, 2008). The transgender community also disagrees with the GID diagnosis due to the gender bounds that the existence of

this "disorder" reinforces and the marginalization that it creates for the community of having a mental illness. Further GID may be an appropriate diagnosis if an individual is experiencing dysphoria, however once an individual identifies as transgender and the dysphoria often resolves, the diagnosis may no longer be appropriate (Israel, 2004). Some advocates in the community offer an advance in the terminology to more accurately represent the experience of gender dysphoria or gender variant experiences, Gender Expression Deprivation Anxiety Disorder (GEDAD). This term more accurately defines the experience of gender expression by recognizing that gender expression, as defined by the individual, is critical to psychological health and moves the locus of attention of religious and political objections in the sexological realm to natural acknowledgement of gender identity in the psychological realm (Vitale, 2005).

Whereas the controversy over the diagnosis of GID is an ongoing debate, what is clear from the stories of transgender and transsexual individuals is that the dissonance experienced early in life of a biological sex and gender identity disconnect does not simply vanish despite intervention or discouragement. Morgan and Stevens (2008) reflect that "compromise and conformity only delay the achievement of comfort and acceptance that comes from living outwardly and openly as their preferred gender" (p. 599). The difficult process of recognition and acknowledgment of a transgender identity, by the individual, community, and professionals alike are only the beginning of a difficult journey of transition and disclosure as a transgendered individual.

Disclosing as transgender

Disclosure or "coming out" as it is often called is the acknowledgement to one's self, and then to others, consistent transgender feelings which can happen across all age groups, socioeconomic levels, locations, occupations, races, and faith communities (Bockting &

Coleman, 2007; Buxton, 2006). Unlike gay, lesbian, and bisexual individuals, transgender individuals cannot "come out" to themselves and live discretely for personal or professional reasons. Contrarily, transgender individuals often feel the need to remake themselves physically and socially in order to express their true gendered identity and many are forced out due to changes in gendered or biological appearances which can create awkward or even dangerous situations (Gagne, et al., 1997; Lev, 2005). Many people view disclosure as a onetime "coming out" statement or milestone; however transgender individuals face a process that takes place over, in some cases, many years. The in/out dichotomy oversimplifies the difficulties and complexities attached to the discourses of this transitional time, the emergence of the gendered identity. Many individuals attempt to compartmentalize their true gendered identities due to pressures of family, peer groups, race and ethnic groups, and religious affiliations (Rasmussen, 2004). Bockting and Coleman (2007) found that positive reactions from others after disclosure can promote esteem and self acceptance whereas a negative reaction can confirm feelings of alienation, fear, confusion and shame. Transgendered individuals often feel more comfortable and are encouraged to disclose first to other transgendered peers who have their own experience with the challenges and benefits of disclosure. Usually transgendered individuals have been holding their secret so long that they are hungry for acceptance and emotional support from others that may be difficult to find.

Disclosure as gay, lesbian or bisexual is a process that has been studied with more rigor than that of the experience of transgender individuals. Traditionally, the experiencing of disclosing as bi- or homosexual has been seen as a sequence of psychological and social progressions. Toriden (1988) identified five stages of this progression are self definition as lesbian or gay, tolerance and acceptance of self-defined identity, regular association with other

gay men and lesbians, sexual experimentation, and exploration of gay sub cultures. Gagne, et al. (1997) see the similarities in the identity management concerns of the sexual minority population, however identifies additional challenges that the transgender population faces. Most of the challenges are due to the unacceptability of transgenderism as an identity whereas there is a cultural acceptance of gay or lesbian as an identity, the community and institutions around homosexuality are more visible in the culture, and the gay communities have done much advocacy work to challenge and dispel the idea that homosexuality is a mental illness. The authors recognize, "Although barriers to self-awareness and acceptance are declining, trangenderists continue to grapple with many of the issues that confronted sexual minorities in the United States prior to the 1970's" (Gagne, et al., 1997, p. 481).

A recent quantitative study has focused on the prevalence and predictors of disclosure of transgender identity by examining the disclosure of 157 transgender individuals (Maguen, Shipherd, Harris & Welch, 2007). For transgender individuals who had disclosed their status, the majority indicated disclosure to first spouses and friends followed by siblings and mothers. Transgender individuals who had a greater difference in gender identity than the one assigned at birth (transsexuals as opposed to cross dressers or bi-genders) reported greater disclosure and younger age also was associated with higher rates of disclosure. The authors hypothesized younger individuals may feel more community support due to access to the internet and other sources of support that were not once available. Another significant finding of this research indicated that individuals who felt the most support had disclosed to more individuals, due to general reinforcement of gender identity encouraging greater rates of disclosure as opposed to those reporting negative experiences tendency to isolate. Whereas the statistics are helpful in hypothesizing reasons individuals chose to disclose to particular people and demographics that

are associated with rates disclosure, the process of disclosing is a highly intimate and transitional moment that may be better explored with qualitative and descriptive data.

The prominent research examining the self-identification process as well as the disclosure process of transgender individuals was done by Gagne, et al. (1997). Their research identified the "coming out and crossing over" process of early childhood experiences of dissonance, coming out to oneself, coming out to others, and resolution of identity. Of most importance to the current study is the examination of the coming out to others stage, in which the transgender individual searched for sources of validation of identity in one's own life and within the community. Interestingly, most of the participants reported that they disclosed out of a sense of responsibility, feeling that the other person "needed to know". The authors found that the intimidation in disclosing to others was often due to fears about how one would be treated, including fears of harassment or abuse by others and anxieties about how others would cope with the non-traditional gender behavior. The participants communicated exaggerated, although not unwarranted, fears and anxiety of disclosing to family and significant others however, in this study, less than one-fourth of the participants experienced negative reactions to their first disclosure due to having a controlled knowledge of their own transgender identity and specifically selecting people who were perceived as sympathetic to alternative identities as determined by previous encounters. The study also found that transgender individuals who resisted the desire to tell and run and contrarily provided details and information about transgenderism and gave the recipient time to cope were those most likely to receive positive, accepting, or supportive responses. Finally, much of the reaction to being told was depended on the values of the recipient of the news as well as the relationships itself. The place where transgender individuals experienced the most difficulty with disclosure was in their place of

work where few were allowed to transition on the job, the majority were fired, asked to resign, harassed, or demoted. Besides the loss of income, the difficulty with the loss of structure and identity that comes with career was also difficult.

In addition to disclosing verbally to family and friends transgender individuals also disclose in another way, by appearing in public expressing one's gender identity as authentically felt facing a range of possible reactions and fears. "Because of the fear and danger inherent in negative public reactions, most transgenderists carefully planned and carried out their initial public excursions in limited-access locations" (Gagne, et al., 1997, p. 498). Many transgender individuals made their first appearances by simply driving around in their vehicles, attending support groups or meeting, and popularly attending gay bars or other predetermined safe havens. Slowly moving from these safe havens to other areas in which transgender individuals wish to have their gender identity validated in a process that grows with confidence and reassurance from members of the community and other supporters.

Whereas there is not much academic literature on the experience and process of disclosing as transgendered, there are multiple organizations that attempt to support individuals through this difficult time. The National Center for Transgender Equality (2009) suggests that some individuals reach a breaking point in which it is too difficult to hide who they are any longer and identify some of the expected rewards and challenges of disclosing as transgender. The benefits include living a whole, open life, building closer and more authentic relationships dispelling myths and fears of transgender individual, and being a role model for others. The center also suggests being well informed to answer questions, timing the disclosure well, ensuring one's own safety, and being patient with the recipients of the news.

Impact on family and friends

Whereas family members and friends are often viewed as extraneous to the experience of the transgender individual, the reality is "the gender variant experience is not simply an internal psychological process that needs to be navigated by transgender and transsexual people, but it is also a relational and systemic dynamic that intimately involves family, friends, loved ones, and all social relationships" (Lev, 2005, p. 11). The transgender individual is embedded in a complex system of familial and societal processes and relations and whereas they may be experiencing a self-focused transition to their authentic gendered identity, their unique experience of discovering and enacting their gender identity impacts family members and/or friends in an immense way (Fraser, 2005). Parents are often those most affected by the disclosure of a transgendered child. Research has shown that parents are invested in the gender identity of their children and whereas they may not enforce gendered expectations for their children, they do enact definite parental tendencies toward gendered treatment of children. Parents make meaning around gender, highlighting what attributes and behaviors are accepted and sanctioned (Kane, 2006).

Because of the social stigma and discrimination associated with the transgender community, it can be difficult for families, friends, and partners to find support when a transgender loved one discloses their transgender identity. In research regarding family and friends reactions after a disclosure, often shock, disbelief, anger, self blame, shame, and embarrassment are the emotions that are experienced by loved ones after a disclosure and the difficulty or inability in coping with these intense feelings may contribute to relationship strains and even downright rejection of the transgendered individual (Zamboni, 2005). Wren (2002) explored children and adolescents experiencing gender identity struggles and found that the

response of parents is likely to be critical in how young people see themselves and sets the social climate within which the experience of gender exploration will be defined. Often parents struggle to understand and fear ideas of body altercations including use of hormones and surgery and experience their own isolation and disconnect. Lesser (1999) identified a grieving process that was experienced by parents in order to move towards acceptance of their child's new gender identity.

As transgender individuals experience their process of transitioning, family members also experience their own process of "coming out". Based on their research with family members of transgender individuals, Emerson and Rosenfeld (1996) suggest a five stage adjustment to a disclosure. The first stage is denial which is marked by shock and hope that the individual is just going through a stage and family members often attempt to push the issue out of their minds. The second stage is anger, often identified along with frustration, skapegoating, and blaming of the transgender individual or other family members for the transitioning. The third stage is bargaining in which threats or promises are made to the transgender person to attempts to stop transgender behavior. Often attempts are made to keep the transition secret, bribes are offered, or threats of ending relationships are made and distinctions are made between individual who accept and do not accept the transgender individual. The fourth stage is depression; a stage reached when the reality of the transgender experience becomes more definitive and often looks like grief type expression. The effects of this stage can be minor to severe, including substance use, divorce, illness, and withdrawal. The fifth and final stage is acceptance when family members no longer dwell on how things could be different and instead turn towards concern for the transgender individual's welfare although they may not agree with the decisions that have been made. Wren (2002) through her research observed that the decision of acceptance (or not)

by parents is closely associated with the how the parents made sense of the transgenderism, the sense making activity and the acceptance feed into each other and transforming the experience of the disclosure.

Lev (2005) identifies the distinction in this emergence process for the family as different than that for the individual "there is an important distinction between engaging in one's own transgender emergence and being 'forced' to cope with another person's emergent transgendered feelings" (p. 11). He also identifies stages of family members post disclosure including four stages of discovery and disclosure, turmoil, negotiation, and balance. He suggests that transgender emergence should be treated as any other lifecycle transition fraught with difficulty, challenges, fear, and ultimately a rewarding experience. He reports that families that are capable of moving through their fear, shame, and ignorance and are able to integrate the transgendered person are often able to find satisfaction in their daily family lives.

The difficulty faced by parents facing a disclosure may be faint in comparison to disclosing to a spouse or romantic partner. Partners who are the recipients of a transgender individual's disclosure can face sexual rejection, challenge to the marriage, concern for children, and crisis of identity, integrity, and belief system. Buxton (2006) who used individuals who disclosed as gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender in her study, reports that resolving these complex issues typically takes from three to six years as the spouse moves from shock and confusion to accept reality, heal, reconfigure their identity, moral compass, and belief system and finally transform their lives whether the couple stays together or not. Partners of transgender individuals that decide to transition face a challenge of their own identity, perhaps being seen as the same gender of their spouse they are forced to reconsider their own sexual orientations. The author reports that about one third of couples break up within the first year after disclosure;

another third stay together for about two years before separating, and the final third commit to staying together although half of those stay together for longer than two years. Her analysis showed that perceptions and assumptions about sexuality and transgenderism as well as accepted ways to handle life's challenges affected partner's reactions, actions taken, and coping. In another study, it was shown that relationships in this process need to be redefined in a fluid and adaptable way so that intimacy is made a priority so that lived experiences of emotional care, honesty, and trust are emphasized (Hines, 2006).

As mentioned, concerns with disclosing to spouses or partners also considerably impact children involved in the family of the transgender individual. The affect on children of such disclosure usually elicit silence, questions, anger, tears, or fear and anticipation and experience of harassment by classmates, friends, religious communities, and neighbors (Buxton, 2006). Further, "Adolescents have the most difficult time dealing with the new information since they, too, are coping with changes in the own sexual identity, and life plans" (p. 321). Contrary to myths surrounding the transgender population, children of transgender parents are not likely to develop their own features of gender identity disorders, nor do they experience mental health problems associated with GID. Freedman, Tasker, and Di Ceglie (2002) found in their research of families with a transsexual parent that none of the children developed any characteristics of gender identity disorder or gender concerns but were more likely to have experienced marital distress and parent-child relational difficulties within their families. Hines (2006) suggests that the importance of open dialogue is integral in terms of enabling children to adapt to the changes of gender variation or transition. Findings from this research suggest that the relationship between a child's parents significantly impacts how the child accepts the gender transitions. Families are put in the position to learn their true selves, expand their world view, and

acknowledge the variety of sexual and personal differences and just as the disclosing person had to discover their own truth before they dared to disclose, so does their families.

Victimization and risk factors

As Western culture may be more open and accepting of the gay, lesbian, and bisexual sexual orientations, views on transgenderism are more slowly changing, "the importance of gender non-conformity remains relatively unchanged: People who transgress gender roles remain at the low end of the hierarchy or acceptability…" (Herek, 1990, p. 328). Gender based violence and discrimination results in an environment in which covert and overt permission is given to punish people for gender transgressions (Lombardi, Wilchins, Priesin, & Malouf, 2002). Western culture's institutions reinforce this permission by federal hate crimes legislation not tracking or documenting attacks based on gender identity or presentation and almost no cities having employee protection and/or legislation protecting people from discrimination or violence based on gender presentation. The National Coalition of Anti-Violence Programs (2008; NCAVP) reported 24% increase in the total number of victims reporting anti- LGBT violence. LGBT individuals reported a 61% increase in sexual assaults since 2007. Of these LGBT reported crimes, the transgender population made up about 15% of the victims, a 12% increase in reporting from the previous year. Whereas these numbers are alarming, the NCAVP reports as well that the increase in reporting of these crimes may be a sign that these individuals are coming out of isolation to report these crimes and hopefully seek support to deal with the trauma. In a study of 402 transgender individuals, 59.5% of the sample experienced violence or harassment, 37.1% had experienced economic discrimination (3 times more likely than non transgendered individuals), 14% had been raped or experienced an attempted rape, 47% experienced some type of assault (Lombardi, et al., 2002). The prevalence of gender based violence in this country

undoubtedly affects transgender individual's ability to self express and present as their preferred

gender identity. The potential for harm and harassment affects the anxieties and fears associated

with disclosing and attitudes and beliefs of families, friends, and peers in this culture

(McDermott, Roen & Scourfield, 2009).

The prevalence of gender discrimination and victimization not only affects individual's

fears of disclosing but has been seen to affect the personal distress experienced throughout

gender identification and expression processes (McDermott, et al., 2008). The narratives of

transgender individuals reflect this distress and the immense impact it has on one's functioning

and self perception. Multiple research studies have seen the effects of the shame that is present in

the discourses that reflects the attitudes of rejection of gender variation and has been shown to

increase risky behavior including excessive drinking, drug use, risky sexual behavior, suicide

attempts, and self mutilation (Di Ceglie, et al., 2002; McDermott, et al., 2008; Rosser, et al.,

2007). Often these behaviors are used in the context of distraction from seeing the true selves

and attempting to repress the desires to transgress gender norms and may be used as coping

strategies to balance the intense feelings of shame, secrecy, rejection, isolation and fear

(Bockting, et al., 2005; Mason-Schrock, 1996). Of these risk behaviors, the sexualized behavior

puts transgender individuals in particular risk. In a study of 235 transgender individuals, one-

third of the sexually active participants reported multiple sexual partners, over one- fourth of

participants reported having unprotected anal or vaginal intercourse, and one-third reported

having unprotected oral sex. As a result of this sexualized behavior confounded with use of

needles to inject hormones and/or drugs, transgender individuals are also disproportionately

affected by sexually transmitted diseases (STD), especially human immunodeficiency virus

(HIV) (Bockting, et al., 2005). Despite this high risk population, there are few programs in place for early education and intervention within this community.

As the literature makes evident, the transgender population is a community that faces innumerous internal, interpersonal, and cultural challenges and struggles. Whereas this community does not have an abundance of literature examining their unique experience, the research that does exist covers topics including what it means to be transgender, the effect this has on parents, spouses, children, and peers, the struggles that this population faces and the effects this has on psychological and interpersonal functioning, and the high prevalence of discrimination and victimization. To the knowledge of this researcher, only one study attempted to examine the experience of disclosing, or coming out, as transgender which was researched within the context of the transition of identity as a whole (Gagne, et al., 1997). The current research seeks to more closely examine the process of disclosing to others after the individual has disclosed to one's self and the experience and meaning of this disclosure for the transgender individual. Questions of interest include who was chosen to disclose to, why these particular people and not others, what the experience was like, and what did it mean to self-disclose. In determining what the experience of disclosing entailed for transgender individuals, this research seeks to add to the research in a way that will help researchers, professionals, and providers better fulfill the needs of the community and decrease the anxieties and tensions associated with the disclosure process.

CHAPTER 3: METHODS

Design of the Study

The current study is a qualitative study that explored the experience of transgender individuals disclosing their gender identity. The qualitative data was collected through in depth, semi-structured individual interviews focusing on the transgender individual's experience of the disclosure process. The interview questions focused on who was chosen to disclose to, why those people were chosen, what the experience was like of disclosing, if there are any arenas in which the individuals live "stealth" or hidden lives, and the meaning of disclosing for the individual. The interview focused on the experience of navigating this unique disclosure process.

Study Participants

The researcher recruited transgender individuals who have disclosed their gender identity to at least one other person. Whereas some research studies have attempted to include or exclude different subcultures within the transgender population, the decision to be open to anyone who identified as transgender was twofold. First, authors who have done extensive research in the community recognized the attempt of outsiders, including researchers and medical practitioners, to impose categories on transgender individuals (Gagne, et al., 2007). In addition, research shows that individuals engaged in the process of transitioning may experience and attempt multiple identities to see which the best "fit" is for their gendered self. By including transgender individuals that identify in different ways along the gender spectrum, this project gained a richer understanding of the experience of revealing oneself to be transgendered. Israel (1996) suggests that encouraging individuals to adopt a gender identification based on their needs and experiences rather than attempting to fit a predetermined category encourages self-determination

and has encouraged relaxation of gender boundaries, which meets the needs of all transgender persons.

The research sought to recruit male to female as well as female to male transgendered individuals who were above the age 18 and identified as transgendered. The researcher recruited 7 participants from transgender support groups in the greater Washington DC metropolitan area. Of the seven participants, all seven were male to female (MTF) transgender individuals, all were Caucasian and between the ages of 30 and 65. All of the participants had some college education, two had master's degrees and five participants were employed at the time of the interview. Three participants identified as married, the other four identified as single. Six of the participants were either living full time or part time as female and were at some stage in the transition process. The final participant identified as a cross dresser and did not have plans to transition at the time of the interview.

Procedures

The study procedures were reviewed by the Virginia Tech Institutional Review Board prior to any recruitment of participants. After approval, purposive sampling was utilized to recruit transgender participants. Through emails to support groups and word of mouth recruitment participants called or e-mailed the researcher to express interest in being part of the research. The researcher and participant set up an interview to take place at a location convenient to the participant; the Virginia Tech Northern Virginia Center was offered as an option for interviews and was the location of 6 or the 7 interviews. The seventh interview took place in a coffee shop chosen by the participant. Upon arrival at the interview location a standardized brief overview was given about the research procedure in addition to a thorough explanation of the informed consent. After completing the consent the interviewer explained the overview of the

interview and then conducted the audio-taped interviews. The researcher used snowballing techniques for recruiting so participants were given fliers in the hope of recommending the project to others in the community. After the interviews confidentiality was assured by not associating identifying information with either the audio-tape or the transcript. The audio-tapes were erased as soon as transcription had been completed and all transcripts, signed consent forms, and research related materials were secured in locked cabinets. Following the interviews, a member check was done at a transgender support group regarding the preliminary themes identified. The support group members were given the chance to discuss the themes and how applicable the theme was to their own experience. Discussion generated some ideas regarding different aspect or understandings of the themes that was taken into consideration throughout the analysis phase as well as potential future research regarding aspects that were not covered in the scope of this study.

Instruments

The interview instrument was a semi-structured interview conducted by the researcher with each individual. The interview was a general interview guide giving the researcher specific questions to ask the participant but with flexibility to probe for more detail when necessary and appropriate. The questions were checked with a member of the transgender community prior to the interviews to check applicability and use of language. The overall purpose of the interview was to examine the experience of disclosing as transgendered. Interview questions include:

1. What was the experience like of disclosing your gender identity to others?

2. What was the time frame between acknowledging trans-identity and disclosing to others as transgendered? How did you know you were ready?

3. Who have you disclosed to? Why these people? Why not others?

4. How did disclosing impact your relationships?

5. Are you stealth (have not disclosed or conceal desired gender identity) in any aspects of
    your life due to choice or necessity or both? How does this affect your daily interactions?

6. Did disclosing as transgender change the way that you saw yourself?

7. What have you gained from disclosing? Lost?

Analysis

After conclusion of the interview, each interview was transcribed verbatim by the
researcher. The data was analyzed using thematic analysis to focus on identifiable themes and
patterns of living or behavior in the transcripts of the transgender individuals (Aronson, 1994).
Thematic analysis employs multiple steps to extract these themes or patterns from the data. The
first step of thematic analysis is becoming familiar with the data and establishing an initial list of
patterns of experiences by using direct quotes or paraphrasing common ideas. The second step is
to organize the patterns into potential themes and gather all data relevant to each potential theme.
The themes are derived from the patterns including conversation topics, activities, meanings, and
feelings to bring together components of the experiences. Throughout the process, the themes are
refined to create clear definitions for each theme. These themes are brought together to form a
comprehensive picture of the collective experience of the participants and captures something
important about the data in regards to the research question (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The final
step in thematic analysis is building a valid argument for choosing the themes and relating this
back to the literature, "when the interviewer is interwoven with the findings, the story that the
interviewer constructs is one that stands with merit" (Aronson, 1994, p. 3).

Credibility and reliability were ensured throughout the data collection and analysis
process. Credibility was established by explicitly locating the researcher and participants in the

work so that the reader has direct access to the words of the participants separate from the ideas of the researcher. Credibility was also be ensured by using rich description of the data, gaining the trust of the participant through total engagement during data collection, and refining the working hypothesis when encountering new or disconfirming data. In the analysis phase, credibility was ensured by developing linkages and perspective among the present study, past research, and theory development. Reliability was established by the researcher by recording the interviews and transcribing interviews verbatim. Consultation with the research committee chair throughout the process helped to avoid research bias in the data collection and analysis phases. By taking thorough field notes and maintaining a paper trail of initial conceptualizations, interviews, transcription, and all phases of analysis the research maintained reliability (Dahl & Boss, 2005).

CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The disclosure experiences of male to female transgender individuals:

A systems theory perspective

Inevitably, one of the very first labels placed on individuals in every culture and family is one of sex. Children are identified as biologically male or female most often prenatally or seconds after they enter the world. From that moment families construct and predict gender expectations and roles for the new infant. Whereas many people use the words sex and gender interchangeably, these concepts represent two very distinct ideas (Wood, 2005). Sex is a designation based on genetic and biological factors, external genitalia and internal sex organs that are determined by chromosomes and hormones present in an individual. On the other hand, gender is a social and psychological construction that is most commonly based on biological sex and learned through social interactions and the way in which one learns to be masculine or feminine. Sex is a classification that is expected to remain consistent and stable over time, however gender is more fluid and changes depending on one's culture, within culture, and in relation to the other gender. Whereas our society suggests that all individuals fall neatly into one of two sex and gender categories, there exists an entire community of individuals who, in fact, do not. This research sought to explore the experiences of transgender individuals, specifically the experiences disclosing their gender identity from a system's theory perspective.

Literature Review

Many people deviate from traditional gender norms in the broadest sense in some aspects of her or his life, but transgender individuals "express their gender in non-traditional ways and find their sense of self as female, male, or other to be in conflict with their assigned gender role" (Burdge, 2007, p.244). The full spectrum of people with non-traditional gender identities include pre- and post- operative transsexuals and cross-dressers, who all fall under the umbrella term of

transgender. A transsexual is a person who transitions and permanently lives as a member of the other gender assisted by hormones and cosmetic surgery. Due to the high financial and emotional costs, more people identify as transsexual than obtain full sex reassignment surgery (Israel, 1996). Cross dressers are individuals who temporarily wear clothing not associated with their given gender to fulfill a need or reduce gender related anxiety in a private or public realm. Individuals who identify as transgender are unique in that they are interested in maintaining masculine and feminine characteristics. They enact their gender in a way that fits their inner needs as opposed to complying with traditional gender expectations. Whereas these definitions and categorizations exist in the culture, transgender individuals adopt a gender-identification based on their needs and experiences to move away from the rigid gender definitions that predominate.

Determining the prevalence of the transgender phenomena is difficult due to the difficulty in gathering accurate statistics on this population in the United States (Brown & Rounsley, 1996). The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM- IV; American Psychiatric Association, 2000) reports that while no epidemiological studies provide data on the prevalence of Gender Identity Disorder, data from smaller European countries' population statistics suggest that roughly 1 per 30,000 adult males and 1 per 100,000 adult females seek reassignment surgery, which is cosmetic surgery that creates a physical appearance more closely associated with the desired gender. More recent data collected in the Netherlands reports that 1 per 11,900 males and 1 in 30,400 females identify as transsexual. This information speaks to the population within the transgender community that seeks sex reassignment but leaves unknown the portion of the population that does not desire sex reassignment. While no reliable statistics on the prevalence of transgenderism exist, other studies suggest that there are individuals who

identify as transgender across all age groups, socioeconomic levels, locations, occupations, races, and faith communities (Bockting & Coleman, 2007; Buxton, 2006).

Transgender individuals face two difficult tasks. One is privately exploring and acknowledging their transgender identity and the second is a public acknowledgement and disclosure of their transgender identity. Disclosing as transgendered is a process of emergence that is not only an internal psychological process but is also a "relational and systemic dynamic that intimately involves family, friends, loved ones, and all social relationships" (Lev, 2005, p. 11). Whereas there is growing and significant research regarding the lesbian, gay, and bisexual community and their disclosure process, there is limited research focusing on the experiences of the transgender population. Much of the research that has focused on the transgender population explores the social consequences of experiencing transgender feelings or disclosing as transgender. These consequences include harassment and discrimination (Factor & Rothblum, 2007), physical and sexual assaults (Lombardi, Wilchins, Priesing & Malouf, 2001), and risk behaviors including suicide attempts, school non-attendance, sexualized behavior, risky sex, and substance abuse (Di Ceglie, Freedman, McPherson, & Richardson, 2002; Mason-Schrock, 1996; Scourfield, Roen, & McDermott, 2008). Due to these social consequences, transgender individuals are at unusually high risk for STDs and HIV (Bockting, Robinson, Forberg, & Scheltema, 2005). In addition there is also significant literature regarding treatment for transgender individuals as well as their family and friends (Buxton, 2006; Emerson and Rosenfeld, 1996; Hines, 2006; Wren, 2002). Some research has developed stage processes in which the authors suggest stages that the transgender individual goes through in their transgender identity development (Devor, 2004; Lev, 2004; Gagne, Tweksbury & McGaugney, 1997). The

stages identified by these authors include a coming out or disclosure phase in the process, which is an integral and interactional part of the transgender identity development.

The Present Study

The current study sought to examine this phase of disclosure more closely by examining the experiences of disclosing as transgender in the context of intimate relationships as well as larger systems of which the transgender individual is a part. As von Bertalanffy stated, "Events seem to involve more than just individual decisions and actions and to be determined more by soci-cultural 'systems,' by these prejudices, ideologies, pressure groups, social trends, growth and decay of civilizations, or what not" (1968, p.8). Interviewing participants from a systems theory perspective allowed for each individual to share her or his experience of disclosure in a language and context that was significant to her or him. It also allowed the researcher to identify different systems in which the disclosure took place and the impact of the disclosure on the systems and the system on the disclosure. Systems theory provided a lens to consider the lived experience of disclosing as transgender as well as any larger, cultural system impact on the transgender individual's decisions of when and to who to disclose. Systems theory's stance of mutual impact and consideration of roles and expectations within the system sets the stage to consider the complexity of the disclosure process of a transgender individual.

Methods

Procedures

The study procedures were approved by the Virginia Tech Institutional Review Board prior to any recruitment. Seven participants were recruited using purposive and snowball sampling with emails and flyers sent to transgender support groups in the Washington DC metropolitan area. The criteria for inclusion were that the participants identified as transgender,

had disclosed their gender identity to at least one other person, and were at least 18 years old. Participant interviews were conducted in person after reviewing an informed consent and at the end of the interview each participant provided demographic information including age, occupation, and religious affiliation.

Measures

The interviews themselves were semi-structured to gain an understanding of each participant's experiences of the disclosure process. Questions were formulated to gain an understanding of the experience of disclosing and capture the systemic impact. The questions were checked with a member of the transgender community who was not a study participant prior to the interviews to check applicability and use of language. The participants were asked about the experience of disclosing and who they chose to disclose their gender identity to. Further, participants were asked about the impact of disclosure on the relationships in which the disclosure was made and what was gained and lost in the disclosure process. Finally, participants were asked to consider larger systems in which they have had to disclose including to medical and mental health professionals as well as to local and federal government workers (usually in regards to security clearances or to change identification documents). Following the interviews, a member check was done at a transgender support group regarding the preliminary themes identified. The support group members were given the chance to discuss the themes and how applicable the themes were to their own experience. Discussion generated some ideas regarding different aspects or understandings of the themes. These were taken into consideration throughout the analysis as well as in considering future research regarding aspects that were not covered in the scope of this study.

Analysis

The interviews were transcribed and thematic coding was used to identify identifiable themes and patterns of living or behavior in the transcripts of the participants (Aronson, 1994). Thematic analysis employs multiple steps to extract themes or patterns from the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The first step of thematic analysis is becoming familiar with the data and establishing an initial list of patterns of experiences by using direct quotes or paraphrasing common ideas. The second step is to organize the patterns into potential themes and gather all data relevant to each potential theme. The themes are derived from the patterns including conversation topics, activities, meanings, and feelings to bring together components of the experiences. Throughout the process, the themes were refined to create clear definitions for each theme. These themes are brought together to form a comprehensive picture of the collective experience of the participants and captures something important about the data in regards to the research question.

Credibility and reliability were ensured throughout the data collection and analysis process. Credibility was established by explicitly locating the researcher and participants in the work so that the reader has direct access to the words of the participants separate from the ideas of the researcher. Credibility was also be ensured by using rich description of the data, gaining the trust of the participant through an open and non-judgmental stance during data collection, and refining the themes when encountering new or disconfirming data. In the analysis phase, credibility was ensured by developing linkages and perspective among the present study, past research, and theory development. Reliability was established by the researcher by recording the interviews and transcribing interviews verbatim. Consultation with the research committee chair throughout the process helped to avoid research bias in the data collection and analysis phases.

By taking thorough field notes and maintaining a paper trail of initial conceptualizations, interviews, transcription, and all phases of analysis the research maintained reliability (Dahl & Boss, 2005).

Demographics

A total of seven participants were interviewed and all seven interviews were transcribed and coded. Of the seven participants, all seven were male to female (MTF) transgender individuals, all were Caucasian and were between the ages of 30 and 65. All of the participants had some college education, including two with master's degrees. Five participants were employed at the time of the interview. Three participants identified as married, the other four identified as single. Six of the participants were either living full time or part time as female and were at some stage in the transition process. The final participant identified as a cross dresser and did not have plans to transition at the time of the interview.

Researcher Characteristics

While taking an Introduction to Gender Studies course as an undergraduate, I became intrigued with the role of gender and expected gender roles in our lives. It was peculiar to me how deeply rooted beliefs about the genders were and how effected people were when discussing their attitudes regarding gender in our culture. In learning about transgenderism, I was fascinated by the population of individuals that challenged these expectations and roles and therefore challenged our culture to reconsider the roles gender plays in everyday life. Thinking about this at a cultural level, led me to think about the experiences of these individuals, the internal struggle to understand their gender identity as well as the way that this must impact those around them. After many more Gender Studies courses and establishing some general knowledge regarding the transgender community, I went into this research with a lot of energy and curiosity as well as a

feeling of wanting to hear and understand the voice of the transgender participants. I feel

compassion towards their struggles as well as inspiration because of their courage. My approach

to this research was academic with the goal of adding to the literature on transgenderism. Also

present was the goal to hear the experiences of the often unheard and misunderstood transgender

individuals.

Findings

Experiences Disclosing Gender Identity

The participants were asked about their experiences of disclosing their gender identity to

others and what this process was like for them. Using the lens of system's theory, the interviews

were analyzed examining the systems in which different disclosures occurred. The findings

reflect this identification of different systems and their impact on the disclosure experiences. The

disclosure process is not linear and as systems theory suggest, there is mutual, ongoing impact

between the participants and their social systems. The experiences within the different systems

were woven throughout the participant's interviews and the challenges that each presented

throughout the process. Three major themes emerged concerning the experience of disclosing.

The themes were (1) feeling an obligation to disclose; (2) the unpredictability of the disclosing

process and of other's responses; and (3) a feeling of liberation after disclosing.

Obligation to disclose

Many of the participants identified either an internal pressure or external circumstances

that resulted in them feeling obligated to disclose their gender identity to family, friends, or other

acquaintances. The participants described this experience in various ways: coming to terms with

their own gender identity, exploring the options for expressing this identity and considering the

possibility of transitioning. One participant identified physical changes which led to the desire to disclose:

> So anyway, I was wearing a little make up I had um gotten my breast forms and I was wearing those and by that time by the middle of May I had everything and I was basically doing it and using it every day. And the weather was starting to warm up so that meant wearing sweatshirts and jackets that cover me up a little more, that wasn't going to work anymore. So, you know I had reached a point where I was going to have to say something or stop.

Five of the participants discussed the experience of experimenting with female clothing on and off throughout their lives and finally coming to a point in which they felt obligated to disclose due to their intention to continue cross dressing or proceed in the transition process. Another participant who was not considering transitioning at the time of the interview disclosed due to the possibility of unexpectedly seeing friends while being dressed as a female:

> I thought you know, that would be awkward if I just happened to bump into them at a restaurant or if they saw me someplace. So I thought you know I just want to tell them. And say look I'm not going to push this on you but you know what, just because I'm not paranoid about being seen by people like that but I didn't want it to be a surprise when it shouldn't have been. Does that make sense? Especially with them living where they were, I mean I eat there fairly often as Jessica[1]. I mean it wouldn't be a surprise for us to cross paths.

Whereas these participants disclosed due to decisions to continue cross dressing or the consideration of transitioning, other participants had the experience of feeling an obligation to

---

[1] All proper names have been replaced by pseudonyms.

disclose based on a desire to be honest and genuine with others. One participant who was

beginning the transition process described this process with a potential romantic partner:

> Because um I was at that time you know considering her a lover, someone I wanted to
>
> grow love with. That was the term we used. So I was opening up and that was one of the
>
> things I thought I needed, I wanted to share with her. Because it was part of my life so I
>
> thought yeah I wanted to share with her. And um I just wanted to be open with her about
>
> that.

These feelings, including the need to be genuine to one's own gender identity and to be genuine

in close relationships, were reflected throughout the interviews in the experience of the

participant's disclosure process. One participant summarized this pressure to come out by saying,

"I couldn't be who I was; I couldn't be the guy anymore. I had to live the life, I had to do it."

Unpredictability

A second theme that emerged throughout the interviews was the uncertainty about the

response of the person that the transgender person was disclosing to. Participants noted that

whereas they were ready to disclose their gender identity, there was an element of uncertainty

about the reaction of the other person and the impact of their disclosure on the relationship. Not

surprisingly, participants seemed to pick people to tell first whom they felt safe and comfortable

disclosing. One participant noted this experience of feeling safe was tempered by concerns about

the reaction when disclosing to her[2] wife,

> Um, but you know and I knew that she didn't mind cross dressers because she had talked
>
> about 'wow I think that's so cool, I would like to see a drag show or something'. And she
>
> talked about that so I knew that she had positive feelings towards it but that's not the
>
> same as saying you're living with one…So we watched on TV some movies and

---

[2] The pronouns used reflect the preferred gender identity as indicated by the participant

documentaries that featured transgender people and them um one day I told her 'I'm transgendered' and she took it in stride… And like I say I knew she was accepting of the general idea and by that time we had seen a couple of movies and documentaries and I figured this is it this is the time.

This participant had a general idea of the way her wife would react due to her reactions while watching movies and her apparent openness to transgendered people. However the participant noted the difference between accepting transgendered behavior in the abstract and living with or being married to someone who discloses as transgender. Other participants would disclose to people despite being unsure of the reaction they would have and expressed some surprise at the reactions they got after disclosing,

I said, my anxiety was telling my parents. My dad was actually easy and he was the one I thought would be you know he was a in the Navy and World War II and um and he had I mean very fixed opinions. He was church going religious person um, my mom goes to church but it had never been a really central part of her life. So I was more worried about him...Then he called said it wasn't a problem so I mean so when I went out there I talked to him at greater length about it. I thought it made me closer to my dad, my mom I've only seen twice since I came out to her…she didn't even really have many questions. I was surprised in fact I was prepared for a lot more of an interrogation from her than I ever got.

Many of the participants would predict how they thought the person to whom they were disclosing would react but were often surprised at the responses they got.

Another aspect of unpredictability was the way in which the relationships changed over time. Several participants noticed that the recipient's reaction to the disclosure seemed to change

in unpredictable ways as the transgender person began to express their gender identity more openly. One participant said,

> But telling someone, that was Angie, my current friend. We live together in a house and I think I told her in the very beginning about it and she was just thinking that it was something to play with she didn't really consider it a serious thing…So with her the experience was positive in the beginning it's only later on that she realized that this was a serious thing. And I'm considering actually transitioning and living as a female that she um didn't think it was such a good thing anymore so there was a lot of you know, um frustration and hurt that she experienced because of that.

A final aspect of the unpredictability is the disclosure to new friends or acquaintances and the reaction of those people. One participant stated, "And there's a whole range of social situations that I know that my situation is somewhat taboo and I'm afraid that if people know <u>what</u> I am they are not going to see <u>who</u> I am". This participant feared the disclosure as something that would prohibit people from getting to know her apart from being transgendered. All of the participants noted some aspect of unpredictability of the recipient's responses throughout the disclosure process.

Liberation

In the experiences of coming out, all seven of the participants expressed some sentiment of liberation or freedom after disclosing. Whereas this liberation was experienced different for participants who have transitioned fully and those who have not, all said that being able to express their gender identity resulted in relief and liberation. The liberation was experienced by the participants first as they identified privately as transgendered. One participant noticed this process,

For so many years you hate yourself for you were. You do, you hate yourself for who you are…You go through so many years of that. Years. Decades... I just couldn't, you couldn't beat it, couldn't overcome it and then in that process when you finally do and start to feel good about yourself you know you have to be who you are. So feeling wonderful about yourself. Wonderful about yourself. I'm not an awful person. I'm not, I'm not a sexual predator or something else. I'm not a deviate. You feel this is who I am.

After the relief of acknowledging their own gender identity, liberation also resulted from disclosing to other people. Most participants said that being transgender was something that they kept secret for so long, that finally telling someone else felt like a relief,

For me it is liberating because you know you have these walls that you built. That really you have built yourself out of fear, out of worry about what the other person may think... And then you are stuck in those walls that you built yourself and it just kind of crushes in on you this secret that you carry around with you… the more you start cracking down the walls and making it bigger and bigger and the more light comes in this dark box that you are in becomes more and more light and it is just a healthy thing.

Disclosing to people is one way in which the participants felt liberated. Another way of disclosing and experiencing liberation was by going out in public for the first time and passing as a woman. One participant said,

The more that I went out as Charlotte the more I felt comfortable the more I knew it was right and the more I knew who I was. It doesn't come over night, there's no fireworks or anything that go off... And you are who you are and if you never live it and you never experience that first time when you feel comfortable going out in public and you pass and, it's phenomenal it's the most powerful thing in the world.

Liberation was the most prominent theme throughout the interviews in the experiences of coming out. The participants found the process of self identifying as transgender, as well as disclosing to others, an experience initially full of fear and anxiety but eventually one of relief, freedom, and liberation.

Gender Disclosure and Effect on Relationships

Since disclosing is a relational experience, in the interviews participants were asked not only about their experiences of disclosing but also the impact that disclosure had on their relationships. The themes that emerged while exploring the impact on relationships were (1) a period of adjustment, (2) a decrease in isolation, and (3) making relational decisions.

A Period of Adjustment

The participants described coming out as a very personal yet public decision, and therefore they had to, throughout the disclosure process, adjust their perspective on who to disclose to as well as how much information to disclose. While the participants often stated that they did not owe it to anyone to explain themselves, they did realize the relational impact of the decisions regarding disclosure. Many participants found acquaintances or new friends the most difficult people to disclose to due to the number of acquaintances and the less intimate nature of those relationships. One participant described this adjustment period:

> One of the biggest problems for me was outside parties. People that you are not friends with, they are not family members but for my case thanks to our son, school, basketball, soccer, I don't know how many people know me that we are not friends with. We are never going be friends but you know they are still going see me. And you know I don't owe them an explanation. But they're obviously going to wonder what I am doing and not everyone is going to take that too kindly and my biggest concern was our son.

Because I didn't want him to get caught in the backlash which could have easily

happened but so far it hasn't been, it hasn't been an issue.

While this participant did not feel that she owed anyone an explanation of her gender identity,

she did realize that her decisions about disclosure would impact those around her and her family

members, even indirectly. A period of adjustment also took place in more intimate and close

relationships after beginning the disclosure process. The participants recognized that people that

have been disclosed to need time to develop an understanding of what is going on for their

transgendered friend or family member. This theme is illustrated by a participant who disclosed

to friends of his, a married couple,

The first time I looked someone in the face and said I'm transgender and then here's

where it is. And what I did for them was I kind of, I told them I said look, 'I'm not going

to push this on you, I'm more than happy to answer any questions that you have but I

don't want to push it on you. And when you're ready, you're ready'. And so we talked

for a couple of hours...And out of the two, and it's an interesting thing you know because

I've known Mark longer by far. You know, he's my best friend. Jackie he married a few

years ago, so we know each other, we get along but we're not like huge, huge close

friends...so for several months there was a period of time where I would kind of talk to

her if Mark was out of the room or away I would talk to her and say 'well how's he

doing, is he ok with it?'

While this participant was willing to disclosure directly to his friends and to answer their

questions he recognized that there was a period of adjustment for him and his long time friend

that may impact their relationship. Similarly, when disclosing to family members, participants

described the family having to adjust their perceptions and experience of the transgender

individual. One participant described her son's struggle to characterize her after disclosing,

> He says 'I can't call you Cathy, you raised me too well, you don't look like dad anymore
>
> I can't call you dad besides if I call you dad out on the town people will start wondering'
>
> …I sat down on the balcony of the apartment and he was standing next to me and he puts
>
> his arm around my head and squeezes me and says 'This is the woman who taught me
>
> everything I know. This is mom, the other one is mother.' From that point on that is the
>
> way that he has referred to me and it has been absolutely wonderful.

This participant's quote recognizes the adjustment for her son and both he and the participant

had to adapt to the new relationship that was developing as mother and son. This theme is

summarized by one of the participants recognition and acceptance of this adjustment phase, "Part

of it is just trying to, is knowing that relationships are going to change and me being flexible

enough to adapt to the change and not expecting everyone else to be as flexible as I".

Decrease in Isolation

One of the most prominent themes throughout the interviews was the participant's

recognition that due to their transition and/or disclosure they acted differently in relationships

and experienced a decrease in isolation throughout the disclosure process. All seven of the

participants described how exploring and expressing their gender identity differently (some

would say correctly) led them to feel more comfortable with who they are and this affected their

relationships. One participant described becoming more self aware and the effect that had on

realtionships,

> I think it's impacted myself more because I feel more expressive and I feel that I'm not
>
> having to hide all of this... And so because I am not so numb I want to talk to people, I

feel like I can talk to people, sometimes I need to talk to people about these things, good

or bad and that really think affects my relationships more than other things.

Another participant became aware of how her increasing comfort with herself affected her

comfort in relationships as a result of attending a transgender support group,

Oh I still remember the first time I walked into [support group] it's hard for people, I

mean people don't understand the gender discomfort. I think it's really hard for people to

understand the isolation of knowing something about yourself that you are afraid to tell

anyone else and just keeping this façade up and your guard up all the time with

everybody. And um it's very isolating. And so um to walk into a room just because I was

there everyone knew already and just to be able to talk to people normally not talk about

gender differences, just to have friendships with people who knew and accepted and stuff

like that and it was really the first time in my life that I didn't have to wonder 'what

would they think if they knew'. And um so that was I was always really shy and reserved

because I figured if anyone got to close they would figure something out or I would let

something slip or so um it's a very lonely existence to be in the closet and coming out I

feel like a different person.

All of the participants mentioned their membership in support groups as contributing to their

decrease in isolation and increase in social support and comfort with themselves and in

relationships. All participants also mentioned some involvement with a therapist, perhaps due to

the Benjamin Standards of Care (2001) which require letters from mental health professionals to

begin hormone treatments or have sexual reassignment surgery. Whereas some participants were

attending therapy as a requirement to progress in their gender transition, many became aware of

the benefits of having a safe place to explore their gender identity and better understand themselves individually and relationally.

> I was completely opposed to therapy... It turned out to be an enormous benefit. Mostly because I would have to revisit my past...So, going in and talking to her and she told me you can't worry about all these people because they are going to see you, you can't hide under a rock. The only way to do this would be to leave your life and move somewhere else where no one knows you and you won't have that problem. But how many people can do that? …you either have to deal with it or suffer.

This participant was able have a source of support and reassurance for handling the disclosure process and the ways to approach relationships. Another participant recognized therapy as another environment in which to explore the gender identity concerns as well as have a safe place to express his gender differently,

> When I went to her at the time I was not depressed, not clinically depressed but I was on my way to being, I was down certainly but I also told her 'and not for nothing I would also like to talk about some of the transgender stuff...' But she was good she was a receptive audience which was good… And it was another chance for me to get out and dress as Jessica just in a completely in a vanilla social sort of thing which actually turned out to be a good thing. That helped whether she knew it or not because I said 'would you mind if I came as Jessica' and she said 'I don't care go ahead.'

The decrease in isolation seemed to come from different aspects of the disclosure process including becoming more emotionally aware and unburdened, approaching relationships differently, finding social support through support groups, as well as exploring gender concerns

through therapy. The decrease and isolation throughout the disclosing also seems to be a result of not having to protect such a big and difficult secret.

Direct Relational Decisions

Perhaps the most significant effect of the disclosure process on relationships was for participants to make decisions that may forever impact the quality of important and intimate relationships. Throughout the interviews participants spoke of the difficult decisions that they had to make in the coming out process. Some of the participants realized that they may lose friends and family throughout the process and have made the decision that coming out and transitioning remains their priority. They came to accept the fact that some people might not be willing to acknowledge the new gender identity. One participant stated her acceptance of the consequences this way:

> So I guess coming out has never been really hard for me because quite honestly, if someone can't deal with it, tolerate it, work with it, they can't look past the physical part, I mean I'm still the same heart and soul I've ever been then that's their loss... I am finally at peace with who I am.

Another participant had a similar experience of the relational decisions that have to be made,

> You know as a transsexual you put all the bits of your life on a table and if you're lucky when you walk out you get to take some of those bits with you. And other things you lose. And you might lose friends, you might lose family members, you might lose your spouse and your kids and your job and your reputation and everything.

Often participants noticed distance or a barrier in some relationships due to their disclosure and struggled with the impact it had on the relationship. One participant noticed this experience with her sister,

> You know, so um my sister and I both live by a certain mantra which is don't ask questions you don't know the answer to. You know so at one point I was making overtures to her about this and this and it became obvious that she didn't really want to know. Not by telling me but by not telling me. You know she wouldn't sort of ask, ok so I get it, which is fine. You know this is something that I'm not ashamed of; I'm not going to force it on other people either. I'm like you don't want to know about it then that's cool…So it was a little painful for me learning that she didn't want to know more about this because it's kind of a blind spot. It's like I can talk to her about anything but this…It's like things like that I have to edit out certain portions of it which I don't like to consider dishonest but it's sort of disingenuous.

Other participants said that losing family and friends was not a decision that they were willing to make. They chose not to jeopardize relationships with people to whom they were close and these decisions affected their lives in a very different way. One participant said,

> I don't know that there is any good advice except don't lose sight of your obligations and responsibilities and your love for somebody that you brought into this world. That was my issue; I couldn't turn my back on that. Having surgery and living as Sandy totally forever wasn't worth it…It wasn't all about me. And that might be the most salient issue for transgender people because they have to focus so much on who they are that it becomes all about them. And I'm not criticizing, it's hard. It's hard to become something that you aren't thought to be. And um you have to focus on yourself to do this and do this

successfully but it isn't all about you. Especially if you are married and have children. I

know people that successfully told their family and have a relationship with their children

and that's good, but that didn't work for me.

This participant decided that instead of transitioning and living full time as a woman, that she

would go back to her family and make them the priority in her life. While she still has some

outlets in which to express her gender identity, the relationships she had in her family were not

worth losing by transitioning completely. Transgender individuals experiencing the disclosure

process face difficult decisions that directly impact relationships in which they are apart.

Whether they prioritize the coming out process, their important relationships, or attempt to

balance both are relational decisions that affect their own lives as well as the lives of the people

around them.

Societal Systems

While the disclosure decisions with family and friends are difficult to navigate,

transgender individuals also face the difficulty of navigating their disclosure experience in the

larger systems of which they are a part. Throughout the interviews, themes emerged regarding

the disclosure process to (1) medical and mental health professionals, (2) the work community,

and (3) legal agencies and societal sentiment as a whole. While some of these disclosures were

not as emotionally difficult as coming out to family and friends, these systems are overarching

reminders of society's, at best, grudging acceptance of transgender individuals and their

experiences.

Medical and Mental Health Field

All of the participants in the study had some experience disclosing their gender identity to

medical as well as mental health professionals. Due to the standards of care that require

transgender individuals to be treated by therapists as well as medical doctors, transgender

individuals usually have little choice in coming out in these systems. One participant discussed

the difficulty in deciding which professionals need to know her gender status,

> I always found it to me a little discomfiting but um I worry you know when I go if I go to
>
> the dentist do I need to tell them? I tell them that I'm taking blood thinners but um do I
>
> need to tell them why? You know any time you go to a doctor and they ask you to list all
>
> the medications you're taking and um so you know you're not sure how people are going
>
> to react to that. Because it's surprising that in the medical community that people are not
>
> all up to what we would hope.

While it may be a little easier to disclose to a therapist or to a doctor prescribing hormones, it is

often difficult for transgender individuals to identify who in the medical community needs to

know. Some participants noted that while the doctors or therapists can be sensitive to gender

identity issues, they are often questioned by the office staff. One participant said,

> I would sometimes go as Dan and sometimes go as Jessica which was amusing because at
>
> one point [my therapist] told me, she was laughing because there was a receptionist out
>
> front and she would say like the receptionist talked to her and said 'sometimes he comes
>
> in as Dan and sometimes he comes in as Jessica.' And she was like 'yeah' and she was
>
> like 'well what should I call him' and [the therapist] said 'well when he's Dan I would
>
> say call him Dan and when he's Jessica I would say call him Jessica (laughing) you so so
>
> it's funny.

Other participants reported that office staff called from waiting room by their previous names,

thus outing them to everyone in the office. While doctors and mental health professionals are

often safer places for transgender individuals to express their medical and personal concerns, the

insensitivity of the staff or professionals to transgender experience can lead to uncomfortable and unfortunate situations.

Work Community

One of the most difficult and controversial places to transition is in the work environment. Of the participants interviewed, two transitioned at work, four had not disclosed to their work community, and one participant was unemployed. Work was the environment where anxiety and risk were experienced and the place where the most preparation had to go into disclosure and transition. One participant recognized the risks of disclosing or transitioning on the job,

> The nature of my job was not conducive. I mean there was another person in the agency in the same headquarters building where I was worked who did transition and theoretically got all this support and stuff but I saw what was happening behind the scenes I hear people talking in the elevator and stuff and what went on and stuff and after a year or two, she was a head of a department and um they started freezing her out… Since my job was mainly I was staff and my effectiveness depended on credibility and people just respecting my opinions um I just felt like it would really compromise my effectiveness at work to transition there...There's societal things that are getting better but I could still be fired just because I am trans. In Virginia there's no law that would prevent that... they could just say well, we don't like transgender people here you're fired.

Another participant was able to transition on the job but discussed the difficulty and amount of preparation that went into the process,

> I was a federal employee at the time, I was a mid- level manager at an agency downtown and coming out at work was also very, probably the most problematic and difficult, to do

it successfully. .. I came out at work and the way I did that was I had my therapist come

down and talk to the managers and I guess someone from human resources and my EAP

counselor was there to explain what it was and why I was doing what I was doing and

what would some of the ramifications would be and when it came time before I

transitioned at work she came in and gave a presentation, I was a manager, to my peers,

you know twenty or 25 managers I worked with at the agency. It was surreal. She came

in, I was there but I wasn't invited to the meeting…The therapist did a great job… Don't

even try and transition on the job without a lot of preliminary work...So then I took a

week or so off and then I came back as Cindy. The agency was pretty good about it for

the most part.

The participants that did transition had to deal with new identification cards, security clearance

questions, naming projects and papers in a way in which their peers could recognize them as the

author, and reestablishing their credentials and accountability. Participants who did not transition

at work had to manage living as two different people, one at work and one at home, and the

riskiness of being seen in the community by fellow employees. Obviously, there are

consequences to be considered either way.

Legal and Cultural Attitudes

While the transgender community has made significant strides in disseminating

information and advocating for resources and equality for transgender individuals, there remain

legal and societal restrictions that present barriers and concerns to the community. One of the

biggest concerns and complaints of are issues with proper identification on for instance, driver's

licenses, passports, or security badges. Since name change policies and gender marker change

policies are so restricted and governed, it takes time and money to change identification so that it

represents the transgender individual in an accurate way. These situations often end in the person having to disclose their status to whoever checks their identification, whether it be a store clerk or a police officer. One participant stated,

> That my driver's license, which is supposed to identify me, has my picture on it this way
> and when I legally changed my name so it has my legal name on it but it says male. Well
> how does that help? I even talked to a police officer I showed her my driver's license and
> I said you know 'do you see anything odd here that would raise questions'. And she said
> no. And I said 'well look at the gender marker'. And she looked at it and she knew I was
> Trans. And I said 'now if you were stopping me would this raise issues?' And she said
> 'well I would probably think it was wrong'. And I said 'well what the point of it then?'
> You know it's just so dumb why do they insist on putting male on my driver's license
> when all it does it maybe confuse people? It doesn't identify me to them, I don't
> understand, so like birth certificates, passports, you can't get that stuff changed just
> because you live in an opposite gender you have to check the boxes that they want
> checked.

Another concern for transgender individuals in our culture is how accepting the community is in general. While participants noted that some communities and environments feel safe, they have to be always mindful of their surroundings and circumstances. This participant describes concerns that she has,

> Partly I've lived in more liberal places. I grew up in San Francisco in the Bay area and in
> here is pretty liberal and stuff so I don't even worry about if someone reads me or
> whatever it's just not a concern to me now so that's just really, really liberating. So now I
> really notice if I'm a little fearful about it. Now I've also noticed that places that I would

have had no fear of going alone as a man I now won't go and that's just not safe for a

woman to be. And where a woman might be attacked and even raped, transgender people

might get killed. Because if they think they are attacking a woman and then they find out

then they get really mad.

This participant is able to identify that some environments feel comfortable and safe although

she is aware of the potential for safety risks. Participants also identified traveling, health

emergencies, going to jail, and divorces as risky situations in which they may be outed, judged,

and potentially unsafe based on their gender identity.

CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSIONS

In this study, MTF transgender individuals discussed their experiences throughout the disclosure process as well as the changes and adjustments that occurred in their relationships. For these participants, disclosing as transgendered was an experience that included very personal feelings and decisions as well as the acknowledgement of the life changing impact these decisions had on their relational and societal systems. Considering the disclosure experience from a systemic perspective, the impact of their disclosure was examined in personal relationships and larger societal systems including the medical and mental health fields and other community agencies. For many participants, the disclosure process was fraught with mixed experiences including fear and liberation as well as increased social support and adjustment in relationships.

While there is not much previous literature on the disclosure experiences of transgendered individuals, there are some similar findings from this study and previous research. Previous studies have identified a similar theme of an obligation or desire to come out whether due to the nature of the relationship or the participant's point in transition. Morgan and Stevens (2008) in a transgender identity development study described this theme as a breaking point, "For some, their decision to transition was because they had reached the breaking point and could no longer go on as they had been" (p. 593). Gagne, et al. (1997) describe a similar finding that the transgender person's early disclosures came from a sense of responsibility or when someone was perceived as needing to know about their gender identity. Further Gange, et al.'s informants also attempted to disclose to people they thought would be accepting although there remained an element of fear,

"They consciously selected individuals to come out to who were, in fact, sympathetic to the alternative identity. Who would be accepting was ascertained through discussions of various potentially volatile issues" (p. 496). Participants attempted to disclose to safe people although there remained a sense of insecurity and unpredictability. A final theme that has been explored in previous research is the relief and liberation that is felt when the preferred gender identity is experienced and acknowledged, often times in a support group. Many participants in many studies identified the importance of safety and acceptance that a support group can provide (e.g. Devor, 2004; Donovan 2001; Hines, 2006; Maguen, Shipherd & Harris, 2005;). Fraser (2005) describes the theme of relief and liberation this way, "For the transgender person, the lifelong task is coming to terms with and accepting their reality…to find meaning in the wisdom of really knowing gender in ways that only a transgender person can, to find meaning in their unique perspective and journey" (p. 16)

While this study found some similar themes as previous work, it also expanded the scope of inquiry by considering the disclosure experiences in the different systems in which the individual is involved. Creating a transgender identity is both an individual and interactional process. The disclosure process is not linear, but rather an ongoing series of decisions based on the relationships and systems in which the individual is disclosing. The experience of disclosing does not end at the disclosure. Rather, as system's theory suggests, the disclosure affects the recipients as well as the relationship. Considering the disclosure experience as a personal, interpersonal, and systemic phenomenon broadens the lens in which to view the transgender disclosure experiences.

Limitations

The limitations of the study need to be acknowledged. The participant composition poses a limitation since the participants all have some connection to a support group. The participants may have more acceptance and understanding of their transgenderism due to participation in the support groups which may be significantly different from transgender individuals who are less connected to the transgender community. This study was also unable to gain the disclosure experiences of Female to Male (FTM) transgender individuals which may be significantly different than those expressed here. Furthermore, while the participants varied in their ages, education, and occupational status, they were all Caucasian and all live in a relatively tolerant Eastern metropolitan area.

Future Research

Considering transgender individuals in the context of their systems including family, friends, work, their community, as well as society as a whole gives researchers and clinicians a new framework in which to consider the impact of their disclosures. As transgender individuals become less hidden and achieve more societal support, ongoing research regarding how individuals manage their disclosures within each system in a more explicit way will be helpful. Using a systemic lens will help clinicians and researchers broaden their perspective on the unique challenges faced in disclosing in personal relationships, the work environment, and with societal and legal agencies. Research examining reactions and factors associated with successful disclosures from the family, work place, and agency point of view can help transgender individuals and those who support them decrease uncertainty, fears, and isolation.

In addition, this research was unable to capture the experiences of FTM transgender individuals. Through presenting the preliminary results to a local support group, differences in

experiences of disclosure for FTM individuals were evident. Future research with FTM individuals may produce significantly different results. Also, the participants in this study were all over the age of 30. Perhaps college aged individuals or adolescents may have different experiences of disclosing their gender identity due to increased acceptance or access to more resources via the internet. Future research capturing a more diverse population may yield significantly different results and transgender disclosure experiences.

Conclusion

As the disclosure process is better understood, transgender individuals can be better supported by therapists and support groups as they make difficult relational decisions. While there will always be an impact of the disclosure and a period in which systems adjust, the more information regarding the transgender population and its challenges the more supportive different systems can become. For so long Western society has held rigid gender roles and expectations. As transgenderism becomes a more understood and acknowledged phenomena, the important transition will be for family, friends, mental health professionals, medical professionals, and government agencies to be as courageous in facing gender issues as transgender individuals are.

References

American Psychiatric Association. (2000). *Diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorders*
(4th ed., text revision). Washington, DC: Author.

Aronson, J. (1994). A pragmatic view of thematic analysis. *The Qualitative Report*, *2*(1).

Bockting, W. & Coleman, E. (2007). *Developmental stages of the transgender coming out
process: toward an integrated identity.* In Ettner, R., Monstrey, S. & Eyler, E. (Eds.),
Principles of Transgender Medicine and Surgery (185-207). New York: The Hawthorne
Press.

Bockting, W.O., Robinson, B.E., Forberg, J., & Scheltema, K. (2005). Evaluation of a sexual
health approach to reducing HIV/STD risk in the transgender community. *AIDS Care,
17*(3).

Braun, V. & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative research in
psychology, 3* (2).

Brown, M. & Rounsley, C. (1996). *True selves: Understanding Transsexualism for families,
friends, coworkers and helping professionals:* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Bullough, V. (2000). Transgenderism and the concept of gender. *International Journal of
Transgender, 4*(3).

Burdge, B. (2007). Bending gender, ending gender: Theoretical foundations for social work
practice with the transgender community. *Social Work*, *52* (3).

Buxton, A. (2006). When a souse comes out: Impact on the heterosexual partner. *Sexual
addiction & compulsivity, 13*.

Carroll, L., Gilroy, P. & Ryan, J. (2002). Counseling transgendered, transsexual, and gender-
variant clients. *Journal of Counseling & Development, 80*

Dahl, C. & Boss, P. (2005). The use of Phenomenology for family therapy research. In D. Sprenkle & F. Piercy (Eds.), Research Methods in Family Therapy. (63-84). New York: The Guilford Press.

Di Ceglie, D., Freedman, D., McPherson, S. & Richardson, P. (2002). Children and adolescents referred to a specialist gender identity development service: Clinical features and demographic characteristics. *International Journal of Transgenderism, 6*(1).

Ehrbar, R. (2004). Cross- cultural examples of gender variance. *Division 44 Newsletter, 20*(2).

Emerson, S. & Rosenfeld, C. (1996). Stages of adjustment in family members of transgender individuals. *Journal of Family Psychotherapy, 7* (3).

Factor, R. & Rothblum, E. (2007). A study of transgender adults and their non-transgender siblings on demographic characteristics, social support, and experiences of violence. *Journal of LGBT health research, 3*(3).

Freedman, D., Tasker, F., Di Cegglie, D. (2002). Children and adolescents with transsexual parents referred to a specialist gender identity development service: A brief report of key developmental features. *Clinical Child Psychology and Psychiatry, 7,* (3).

Fraser, L. (2005). Therapy with transgender people across the life-span. *Division 44 Newsletter, 21* (3).

Gagné,P., Tewksbury,R. & McGaughey, D. (1997). Coming out and crossing over: Identity formation and proclamation in a transgender community. *Gender & Society*, *11*(4).

Herek, G. (1990). The context of anti-gay violence: Notes on cultural and psychological heterosexism. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence, 5*.

Hines, S. (2006). Intimate transitions: Transgender practices of partnering and parenting. *Sociology, 40* (2).

Israel, G. (1996). Trangenderists: When self-identification challenges transgender stereotypes. *Gianna E. Israel Gender Library.* Retrieved from

http://www.firelily.com/gender/gianna/transgenderists.html

Israel, G. (2004). Supporting transgender and sex reassignment issues: Couple and family dynamics. In J. L. Bigner & J. L. Wetchler (Eds.), Relationship therapy with same-sex couples (pp. 53-63). New York: Haworth Press, Inc.

Israel, T. (2005). …And sometimes T: Transgender issues in LGBT psychology. *Division 44 Newsletter, 21* (3).

Kane, E. (2006). "No way my boys are going to be like that!" Parents' responses to children's gender nonconformity. *Gender and Society, 20*(2).

Lips, H. (2005). *Sex and gender: An introduction.* New York: The McGraw-Hill Companies.

Lesser, J. (1999). When your son becomes your daughter: A mother's adjustment to a transgender child. *Families In Society: The Journal of Contemporary Human Services, 80*(2).

Lev, A. (2005). Transgender emergence: A family affair. *Division 44 Newsletter, 21* (3).

Lombardi, E., Wilchins, R., Priesing, D. & Maouf, D. (2001). Gender Violence: Transgender experiences with violence and discrimination. *Journal of Homosexuality, 42*(1).

Manguen, S., Shipher, J., Harris, H. & Welch, L. (2007). Prevalence and predictors of disclosure of transgender identity. *International Journal of Sexual Health, 19*(1).

Mason- Schrock, D. (1996). Transsexuals' narrative construction of the "True Self". *Social Psychology Quarterly, 53* (3).

Mallon, G. & DeCrescenzo, T. (2006). Transgender children and youth: A child welfare perspective. *Child Welfare, 85* (2).

McDermott, E., Roen, K., & Scourfield, J. (2008). Avoiding shame: Young LGBT people, homophobia and self-destructive behaviours. *Culture, Health & Sexuality, 10*(8).

Meissner, W. (2005). Gender identity and the self: Femininity, homosexuality, and the Theory of the Self. *Psychoanalytic Review, 92* (1).

Money, J. (1955). Hermaphroditism, gender, and precocity in hyperadrenocorticism: Psychological findings. *Bulletin of Johns Hopkins hospital, 96*(6).

Morgan, S. & Stevens, P. (2008). Transgender identity development as represented by a group of female-to-male transgendered adults. *Issues in Mental Health Nursing. 29*.

National Coalition of Anti-violence Programs (2009). Hate violence against lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people in the Unites States. Retrieved from shttp://www.ncavp.org/.

National Center for Transgender Equality. (2009). Transgender visibility guide. *Human rights campaign coming out project.* Retrieved from http://www.hrc.org/

Rasmussen, M. (2004). The Problem of Coming Out. *Theory Into Practice, 43* (2).

Reilly, M. (2007). Influential factors in the coming out process of transgendered individuals. *Dissertation Abstracts International, 68* (4-B), 2216.

Rosser, B., Oakes, M., Bockting, W., & Miner, M. (2007). Capturing the social demographics of hidden sexual minorities: An internet study of the transgender population in the United States. *Sexual Research and Social Policy, 4*(2).

Scourfield, J., Roen, K., & McDermott, L. (2008). Lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender young people's experience of distress: Resilience, ambivalence and self-destructive behavior. *Health and Social Care in the Community, 16*(3).

Stryker, S. (2008). *Transgender History.* Berkeley, CA: Seal Press.

Troiden, R. (1988). Homosexual identity development. *Journal of adolescent health care, 9* (2).

Vitale, A. (2005). Rethinking gender identity terminology in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Health Disorders IV. *Trans-FHealth.* Retrieved from http://www.trans-health.com/displayarticle.php?aid=126.

Von Bertalanffy (1968). *General Systems Theory: Foundations development application.* New York: George Braziller, Inc.

Wallien, M. & Cohen-Kettenis, P. (2008). Psychosexual outcome of gender-dysphoric children. *American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, 42* (12).

Wood, J.T. (2005). *Gendered lives: Communication, gender, and culture.* Belmont, CA: Wadsworth.

Wren, B. (2002). 'I can accept my child is transsexual but if I ever see him in a dress I'll hit him': Dilemmas in parenting a transgendered adolescent. *Clinical Child Psychology and Psychiatry, 7,* (3).

Zamboni, B. (2005). Transgender friends and family. *Division 44 Newsletter, 21* (3).

Appendix A

Informed Consent

Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University

Informed Consent for Participants

in Research Projects Involving Human Subjects

The experience and meaning made of disclosing as transgender: A Qualitative Study

Dr. Eric McCollum, Principal Investigator

Maureen Smith, Co-Investigator and Interviewer

I. Purpose of the Research

The goal of this study is to gain an understanding of the experiences of disclosing one's gender identity and the meanings that this experience holds. By doing so, it is hoped that the information gained may benefit therapists who work with transgendered people as they go through this potentially difficult time. Additionally, the researcher believes that much of the information gained may also be valuable in helping family members and/or friends and the community in general understand this experience. Finally, the author is hoping to add to the currently insufficient body of research on transgenderism and the experience of disclosing.

II. Procedures

As a participant in this study:

- You agree to participate in an audio-recorded interview about the experience of disclosing your gender identity.
- You can expect the interview to last approximately 60 minutes.
- You will have the information you provide combined with other participants' responses into a report. The report will be about the participants' experience of disclosing their gender identity.

III. Risks

- There is some risk of emotional distress or discomfort for study participants as you will be asked to recall potentially difficult events or interactions with others and/or continued relational difficulties since having disclosed your gender identity.
- The researcher has referral information for mental health services available should you wish to further process any difficult emotions, memories, etc. brought about during the interview.

IV. Benefits

- It may be considered a benefit for you to share your story and talk about your experiences. Also, retelling your experiences of disclosing your gender identity may be an empowering and enlightening experience.
- You will be helping add to the currently insufficient body of research regarding transgender individuals and the disclosure experience.

V. Anonymity and Confidentiality

- All of the information provided during the interview and the over-the-phone or e-mail screening is confidential.
- All identifying information provided during the audio-recorded interview will be removed and replaced with aliases in the typed transcript and the study report.
- The only individuals with access to the audio recording and original transcript will be the Principal Investigator and Co-Investigator.
- The audio tape will be destroyed as soon as it has been transcribed and checked.
- Portions of your interview text may be used verbatim in the report of the project or in subsequent publications. No identifying information will be associated with any part of your interview that might be used.

VI. Compensation

- There is no compensation for taking part in this focus group.

VII. Freedom to Withdraw

- You have the right to refuse to answer any question at any time.
- You have the right to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty.

VIII. Participant Responsibilities and Permission

- Voluntarily agree to participate in this study. I have the following responsibilities: to discuss, to the best of my ability, my experience/process of disclosing my gender identity.
- I have read this consent form and have had all my questions answered. I hereby acknowledge the above and give my voluntary consent:

_____ Date_____

Participant signature

If you have any questions about this research in any capacity, research subjects' rights, and/or whom to contact in the event of a research-related injury, you may contact:

Dr. Eric McCollum   (703)538-8460/ericmccollum@vt.edu

Principal Investigator   Telephone/e-mail

David M. Moore   (540)231-4991/moored@vt.edu

Chair, Virginia Tech Institutional Review   Telephone/e-mail

Board for the Protection of Human Subjects

Office of Research Compliance

2000 Kraft Drive, Suite 2000 (0497)

Blacksburg, VA 24060

Appendix B

Demographic Questionnaire

1. What is your gender identity?

2. What is your age?

3. What is the highest level of education you have completed?

4. What is your occupation?

5. What is your current marital status?

6. What is your religious affiliation?

7. What is your race?

Appendix C

Interview Questions

Tell me about your experiences of disclosing your gender identity.

What was the time between acknowledging your trans-identity for yourself and self-disclosing to anyone as transgender? What told you that you were ready?

- What prompted you to disclose when you did?

- Who and/or what had an impact on this decision?

Who have you come out to? Why these people and why not others? How did you deliver the news?

What has this experience of disclosing been like for you? How did it impact your relationships?

What did it mean for you to disclose as transgendered to others? What have you gained or lost? How does it change the way you see yourself?

Please tell me about the areas in your life, if any, you are stealth at present. What impacted the decision to stay stealth in these areas? How does this affect your daily interactions?

▦ VirginiaTech

DATE: December 7, 2009

MEMORANDUM

TO: Eric E. McCollum
              Maureen Smith

FROM: David M. Moore

Approval date: 12/7/2009
Continuing Review Due Date:11/22/2010
Expiration Date: 12/6/2010

SUBJECT: **IRB Expedited Approval:**   "Experience of Disclosing as Transgender" , IRB # 09-970

This memo is regarding the above-mentioned protocol. The proposed research is eligible for expedited review according to the specifications authorized by 45 CFR 46.110 and 21 CFR 56.110. As Chair of the Virginia Tech Institutional Review Board, I have granted approval to the study for a period of 12 months, effective December 7, 2009.

As an investigator of human subjects, your responsibilities include the following:

1.   Report promptly proposed changes in previously approved human subject research activities to the IRB, including changes to your study forms, procedures and investigators, regardless of how minor. The proposed changes must not be initiated without IRB review and approval, except where necessary to eliminate apparent immediate hazards to the subjects.
2.   Report promptly to the IRB any injuries or other unanticipated or adverse events involving risks or harms to human research subjects or others.
3.   Report promptly to the IRB of the study's closing (i.e., data collecting and data analysis complete at Virginia Tech). If the study is to continue past the expiration date (listed above), investigators must submit a request for continuing review prior to the continuing review due date (listed above). It is the researcher's responsibility to obtain re-approval from the IRB before the study's expiration date.
4.   If re-approval is not obtained (unless the study has been reported to the IRB as closed) prior to the expiration date, all activities involving human subjects and data analysis must cease immediately, except where necessary to eliminate apparent immediate hazards to the subjects.

<u>Important:</u>
If you are conducting **federally funded non-exempt research**, please send the applicable OSP/grant proposal to the IRB office, once available. OSP funds may not be released until the IRB has compared and found consistent the proposal and related IRB applicaton.

cc: File

Invent the Future