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The Experiences of Partners of People Transitioning to a Different Gender

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Abstract

Previous research has shown that gender transition of one partner in a relationship impacts the non-transitioning partner's sense of identity, emotional wellbeing and their relationship with their transgender partner. This topic is under-researched and very little of this research has examined the wider social implications of being a partner of a person making a gender transition. To date no published research of this kind has been conducted in New Zealand. This project explored the experiences of the former and current cisgender (non-transgender) partners of people transitioning from one gender to another. In particular the project explored how cisgender partners felt their partners' transition impacted on them and their relationships, as well as how they experienced the disclosure of their partners' transgender identity. Six participants (four were separated from their partners, five women, one man, aged 21 to 39 years, all identified as non-heterosexual except one) were recruited through advertising via social media and support groups. Participants took part in in-depth semi-structured one-on-one interviews; these were transcribed and analysed using interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA). Three superordinate themes and ten subthemes were found. They were: "Coming Out as a Process"; "Support"; and "Changes to the Relationship and Self". Many of the participants experienced their partners' disclosure as transgender as a gradual and shared process. Participants felt that their partners' transition shaped their relationships and themselves in different ways and responded to their partners' transition with a range of emotions and cognitions. Participants generally felt supported by others but felt there was a lack of understanding, support and resources that were specific to their needs. There is clear need for good sources of support for cis partners. Future research efforts could usefully explore the support needs of partners of transitioning people and the best ways to distribute this support.

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Table of Contents

Abstract	ii
Acknowledgements.....	iii
Chapter one: Gender, identity and partners of transgender people.....	1
Defining transgender, cisgender and gender transition.....	3
Theoretical perspectives on the construction of gender and sexual identities	3
Research on partners’ experience	5
Constructions of gender and sexual identities in partners	7
Sexual practices and intimacy.....	12
Grief, loss and support	13
Other challenges.....	14
Positive elements of gender transition	16
Current study and research aims	16
Chapter two: Methodology and method	19
Methodology	19
Epistemology	19
Analytic approach: Interpretative phenomenological analysis	20
Research quality.....	24
Method.....	24

Study design.....	24
Data management and transcription.....	28
Ethical considerations	29
Reflexivity.....	30
Data analysis procedure	33
Chapter three: Results and discussion.....	35
Coming out as a process	35
Private and intimate disclosure	36
Public disclosure	47
Support.....	50
Barriers to getting adequate support	50
Helpful support and helping oneself.....	53
Being supportive	54
Changes to the relationship and self	58
Change to self: Knowledge, worldviews, and personal qualities	58
Change in sexual identity of self and the relationship	60
Changes to sexual intimacy	63
Changes in the nature of the relationship.....	65
Chapter four: Conclusions, implications, recommendations, reflections and future research.....	69
Implications and recommendations	72

Limitations, strengths, reflections, and future research	74
Conclusion	77
Appendices.....	78
Appendix A.....	78
Appendix B	79
Appendix C	81
Appendix D.....	82
Appendix E	83
Appendix F.....	85
Appendix G.....	87
Appendix H.....	88
Appendix I	89
Appendix J	90
Appendix K.....	91
References.....	92

List of tables

Table 1. Participants' demographics, identities, and relationship information.....	25
Table 2. Superordinate themes and subthemes	35

Chapter one: Gender, identity and partners of transgender people

Recently transgenderism and gender variation have been in the media spotlight. From transgender inmate Sophia Buset in the American television series, *Orange is the New Black*, to Olympic gold medallist, formerly known as Bruce Jenner coming out to the world as a transgender woman, Caitlyn Jenner, in early 2015 ("Caitlyn Jenner debuts new K-less name.," 2015). Australian actor Ruby Rose, and American singer and actor Miley Cyrus have both publicly identified themselves as of no particular gender (Brisbane, 2015). This publicity of transgenderism and gender variation has sparked dialogue about what it means to be transgender. Gender issues and transgenderism are now receiving greater media exposure in New Zealand. Local newspapers and student university magazines have published numerous articles on transgenderism and gender identity, increasing awareness of gender variant people and their stories (e.g. Coutts, 2015; Mathers, 2015; Prout, 2015; Stewart, 2015; Talusan, 2015). Previous research has focused on the experiences of transgender people and there is growing but still limited research on the impact on partners (Franklin, 2014; Pfeffer, 2009). In this chapter, I discuss how researchers have defined transgender and other relevant terms. I then discuss the construction of gender and sexual identities, and review studies that examined the experiences of current and former partners of transgender people transitioning from one gender to another.

The population of transgender and gender diverse people is significant. It is estimated that up to one out of 500 people worldwide are transgender (Olyslager & Conway, 2007). A survey conducted in 2012 with New Zealand secondary school children reported that one percent of respondents identified as transgender (Clark et al., 2013). Not only is there a significant population of transgender people but according to reviews of the status of human rights in New Zealand and the USA, transgender people are a marginalised group and frequently experience discrimination (Grant et al., 2011; Human Rights Commission, 2008). Many transgender people face barriers living as the gender that they identify as, such as changing names on legal documents or accessing medical care for sex reassignment procedures, harassment, assault, and rejection from family members (Grant et al., 2011; Human Rights Commission, 2008). Mental health issues, such as suicidal ideation and depression are also common amongst New Zealand and Australian transgender adults (Couch et al., 2007).

Slightly different definitions of transgender, transgender man or transgender woman have been used in previous research. In most studies, researchers, except L. M. Chase (2011) and Gurvich (1991), imply that gender is socially constructed. L. M. Chase (2011) defined transgender or trans people as “individuals who have undergone a gender transition through hormone replacement therapy and/or sexual reassignment surgery” (p. 450). Similarly, Gurvich (1991), drawing from the Erickson Educational Foundation (1974), defined transsexual people as those who have undergone sexual reassignment surgery. By stating that one can only change their gender via medical intervention suggests that these researchers define gender as directly linked to their secondary sex characteristics rather than a product of their behaviours and socialisation.

Conversely, Pfeffer (2008, 2009, 2010, 2014) used the term transgender for those who do not identify with the gender they were assigned at birth. This suggests that gender is a social category, rather than something that is inherently biological. She also defined trans man as an abbreviation of transsexual or transgender man, and as an individual who was assigned female at birth but identifies as a man or somewhere on the masculine spectrum. Joslin-Roher and Wheeler (2009) defined transgender man “as an individual assigned the sex of female at birth and who identifies with the male gender, regardless of biology or medical intervention” (p.36). Aramburu Alegría (2008, 2010, 2013) used a similar definition, drawing from Vitale (2001), defining transgender women as individuals who have transitioned or are transitioning male to female, assigned male at birth, and who view themselves as female. Brown (2007, 2009, 2010) considered people to be transgender if they self-identify as transgender and have transitioned by at least changing their name and pronoun. These definitions include people who are unable to surgically or medically transition due to financial, health, or other constraints. These definitions prioritise people’s own views of their identities within their own terms, but to a limited extent, as some researchers still define gender in terms of binary categories (e.g. Joslin-Roher & Wheeler, 2009; Aramburu Alegría, 2008, 2010, 2013). Moreover, Brown’s (2007, 2009, 2010) definition is problematic because some people have gender-neutral names and do not want to change them. In addition, it is suggested that people do sit outside of the gender binary. For example in Pfeffer’s (2008, 2009, 2010, 2014) studies, some of the transgender partners identified as genderqueer (individuals who identify outside the categories of male and female, Serano, 2007), rather than as trans men. Other

researchers such as Nyamora (2004) and Ward (2010) did not clearly define transgender in their studies. As understandings of the term transgender vary amongst researchers, this is problematic because definitions imply different things. Therefore, it is important that researchers clarify what they mean when they use the term transgender.

Defining transgender, cisgender and gender transition

The definitions of transgender, gender transition and cisgender used in this thesis follow the definitions outlined in Pfeffer (2008, 2009, 2010, 2014) and Serano (2007). According to Serano (2007), transgender includes gender identities such as: “transsexual (living as the sex other than the one they were assigned at birth), intersex (those born with reproductive or sexual anatomy that does not fit typical definitions of female or male), and genderqueer (those who identify outside of the female/male binary), as well as those whose gender expression differs from their anatomical or perceived sex” (p.25). However it is important to note that some intersex people do not consider themselves transgender (Serano, 2007). I have defined a transgender (shortened to trans) person as someone who identifies with a different gender to the one they were assigned to at birth, including people who identify as transsexual, intersex and genderqueer (Pfeffer, 2008, 2009, 2010, 2014; Serano, 2007). When a person moves from one gender to another, I have referred to this as gender transition. Gender transition is defined as any actions a person uses to align themselves with their self-identified gender that is different to the one assigned at birth (Pfeffer, 2009). These actions could include taking female or male hormones, changing their name and pronouns, wearing differently gendered clothing, and undergoing GRS (Pfeffer, 2009). Following Serano (2007), I have defined cisgender person as someone who identifies with the gender they were assigned at birth, which I shorten to the common abbreviation, cis.

Theoretical perspectives on the construction of gender and sexual identities

In this thesis I have used definitions of cisgender and transgender that suggest that gender is socially constructed. This is consistent with Feminist Theory and Queer Theory which I draw on to conceptualise these constructs. Both Feminist Theory and Queer Theory claim that gender and sexual identities are social constructions (Jagose, 1996; Rich, 2007; Sandstrom, Lively, Martin, & Fine, 2014; Spargo, 1999). There are two main components to Queer Theory: Butler’s concept of

performativity (Butler, 1990, 1999) and Foucault's constructed category of knowledge (Foucault, 1978).

Butler (1990, 1999) claims that we are not born with our gender but we acquire it. Gender is assigned to us at birth based on the interpretation of external genitalia. C. Chase (2005) highlights the instability of gender through her own experiences. C. Chase was born intersex and was assigned male at birth and was legally and socially male for the first 18 months of her life. When she was older, she had her genitals altered to look more female and was re-assigned as female and raised as female. Gender acquisition is not complete at birth or in C. Chase's (2005) case, as a young child, it is a process and a performance that continues throughout life (Butler, 1999). de Beauvoir (2009) claims that one is not born a woman but becomes a woman. Gender is what we do, learn and perform. Gender is the repetition of gestures, acts, and the stylization of the body and it is out these repetitions that gender identity arises (Butler, 1999). This performance of gender becomes so embedded in the social structure that it appears to be a natural inherent part of us (Butler, 1999). We perform gender in accordance to social rules and face consequences if we break these rules (Butler, 1999). Similarly, sexual identity is something that we do and develops from the repetition of practices (Butler, 1990).

Foucault (1978) suggests that sexual identity is not an innate property, but rather a constructed category of knowledge. He argues that around the late 19th century homosexuality went from a set of practices to an identity. Prior to the late 19th century, same gender sexual relations did occur, but the people who engaged in this activity were not labelled as homosexual. However, men in the late 19th century who engaged in same sex relations were encouraged to see themselves as homosexual. Foucault suggests that how people identify themselves is dependent on the language and discourses available to them.

The constructed nature of sexual identity means that it becomes difficult to define. It is unclear what it means to belong to a sexual identity as there is no one precise way to define sexual identity. Califia (2005) questions whether sexual identity should be based on gender of oneself and one's object of desire. Sexuality is complex and multi-layered, so why not base sexual identity on the many facets of sexuality (Califia, 2005)? Even if we use gender as a basis for sexual identity, we

still run into trouble because gender identity is an elusive concept. Many people do not identify with the two standard gender identities. For example, participants in Pfeffer's (2008, 2009, 2010, 2014) studies identified as genderqueer. In terms of sexuality, how would these people be identified? Jagose (1996) points out that what is considered homosexual is flexible, those who engage in homosexual activities do not necessarily consider themselves as homosexual. Sedgwick (1990) suggested that the same sexual acts can mean different things to different people. Califia (2005) further adds that the meaning of the same sexual acts can mean different things in different contexts. So what constitutes one's placement in a sexual identity category (Garber, 2005)? Is it one's attraction, behaviours, identity or a combination of these (Garber, 2005)?

Research on partners' experience

Until recently the research focus has been on transgender people themselves (Pfeffer, 2009) and the earlier research on partners of people transitioning to another gender has been limited. Research in this area has attempted to understand partner experiences and relationship quality within these dyads. For example, researchers have interviewed cisgender women partners of transgender men in order to gain insight into the types of women who fall in love with transgender men (Steiner & Bernstein, 1981); compared relationship quality of cisgender women–transgender men couples with cisgender women–cisgender men couples (Fleming, MacGowan, & Costos, 1985); compared cisgender–transgender couples with cisgender couples in terms of relational and sexual satisfaction (Kin, Hoebeke, Heylens, Rubens, & De Cuyper, 2008); and examined whether cisgender women partners of cross-dressing men and transsexual women became confused about their sexual identity after learning about their partners' cross dressing and transsexual identities (Hunt & Main, 1997).

More recent research has looked more in-depth into how cisgender partners experience their partners' gender transition and have shown that being a partner of a gender transitioning person can be both challenging and positive. More recently the research on partners has given a better insight into their experiences. These studies give partners of trans people a voice that allows exploration of their experiences, provides insight into what it is like to be partnered with a person who is transitioning and how diverse these experiences are. In this section I will review the key studies in this topic area. This review will focus on common findings presented in the previous

research, including findings around: gender and sexual identities; sexual practices and intimacy; the challenges and positive outcomes of gender transition.

The studies reviewed below included almost exclusively North American, white, cis women, with sample sizes ranging from five to 50 participants, aged 18 to 69 years of age (Aramburu Alegría, 2008, 2010, 2013; Aramburu Alegría & Ballard-Reisch, 2013; Brown, 2007, 2009, 2010; L. M. Chase, 2011; Joslin-Roher & Wheeler, 2009; Nyamora, 2004; Pfeffer, 2008, 2009, 2010, 2014) with a few exceptions. Two studies included a participant based in Australia (Pfeffer, 2009, 2014). Some of the studies included people of colour who made up a small minority of participants (Brown, 2007, 2009, 2010; Joslin-Roher & Wheeler, 2009; Nyamora, 2004; Pfeffer, 2009, 2010, 2014). One study included an interview with trans woman on her experience of her partner's transition (Joslin-Roher & Wheeler, 2009), one study included a trans man (Brown, 2009), and three studies also included interviews with trans women along with their cis women partners (Aramburu Alegría 2008, 2010; Aramburu Alegría & Ballard-Reisch, 2013). Many studies did not mention whether the cis partners were parents or whether they had children with their trans partners (Aramburu Alegría, 2008, 2010, 2013; Aramburu Alegría & Ballard-Reisch, 2013; Joslin-Roher & Wheeler, 2009; Pfeffer, 2008; Ward, 2010). However many of studies did include the parental status of the cis partners and included some cis partners who were parents (Brown, 2007, 2009, 2010; Nyamora, 2004; Pfeffer, 2010) but only a few discussed how transition interacted with being parents and impacted their children (Bischof, Warnaar, Barajas, & Dhaliwal, 2011; L. M. Chase, 2011; Gurvich, 1991; Pfeffer, 2009, 2014). All studies except for one (Bischof et al., 2011) used one-on-one interviews. Bischof et al. (2011) conducted a thematic analysis of the narrative accounts of cis women partners of trans women published in a book by Erhardt (2007). Most of the studies included cis partners who were partnered with their trans partners prior to disclosure of their trans status and during some part of their transition (Aramburu Alegría, 2008, 2010, 2013; Aramburu Alegría & Ballard-Reisch, 2013; Bischof et al., 2011; Brown, 2007, 2009, 2010; L. M. Chase, 2011; Gurvich, 1991), whereas the other studies only included participants who were partnered with a trans person at some point of their gender transition (Joslin-Roher & Wheeler, 2009; Nyamora, 2004; Pfeffer, 2008, 2009, 2010, 2014) and one did not specify when the cis-trans couples were partnered (Ward, 2010).

Constructions of gender and sexual identities in partners

Drawing on the notion that gender and sexual identities are not innate, but are performed and socially constructed categories of knowledge (Butler, 1990, 1999; Foucault, 1978), research on the experiences of partners of transgender people illustrates the performative aspects of gender. Previous research has shown that partners will perform their gender in a way that complements their transitioning partners' gender identity (Aramburu Alegría & Ballard-Reisch, 2013; Brown, 2010; L. M. Chase, 2011; Pfeffer, 2008, 2009, 2010, 2014; Nyamora, 2004; Ward, 2010). One way that this gender performance occurred was in the way cis partners expressed their gender. The cis women partners of trans men actively altered their gender expression by emphasizing their femininity to reinforce the masculinity of their partners, to show their partners that they think of them as men and validate their gender identity (L. M. Chase, 2011; Pfeffer, 2009, 2010, 2014; Ward, 2010). Pfeffer (2008) explored how body image of trans men impacted their cis women partners, and it was found that trans men who did not feel masculine enough encouraged their partner to act and dress in a more feminine manner to bolster their masculinity. Cis women partners of trans women had not felt obliged to maintain the same levels of feminine presentation prior to their partners' transition (Aramburu Alegría, 2008), but interestingly, they did not actively change their appearance (Bischof et al., 2011; L. M. Chase, 2011). Other research found that gender expressions sometimes became reversed in particular relationships. Alegría Aramburu and Ballard-Reisch (2013) explored gender expression of cis women partners of people transitioning into women, and found that cis partners felt like the masculine partner in their relationships, and engaged in stereotypically masculine forms of affection such as putting their arm over their partners' shoulder.

This performance of gender extended to intimate situations. Ward (2010) examined how women partners "give" their trans men partners gender by conducting both interviews and examining trans men related articles in lesbian magazines, documentaries on trans men identities and websites addressing trans/femme issues. Ward (2010) found that queer magazines published articles to teach women how to interact sexually with trans men in ways that show that they are men, and that femmes (i.e. people who adhere to commonly understood notions of femininity) played the role of "the girl" in sexual interactions. It was suggested that sexual interactions between femmes and their trans men partners play an important part in giving gender to trans men, thus validating their

masculinity. Pfeffer (2008) also found that cis women partners of trans men played the “role of the girl” in sexual interactions to affirm their partners’ masculinity. Similarly, Brown (2010) found trans men took on stereotypical masculine (e.g. initiating sex, penetrating their partners) activities during sex as they transitioned, which made some cis partners uncomfortable.

Partners of transgender people also validated their gender identity by how they interacted with their trans partners’ bodies. Pfeffer (2008) and Brown (2010) found that cis women partners made efforts to avoid touching “female” body parts of their trans male partners as to not make their partners uncomfortable about their bodies. The act of touching their trans partners’ breasts serves as a reminder that they have “female” bodies which had a demasculising effect (Brown, 2010; Pfeffer, 2008). Sexual interactions became complicated or non-existent due to having to make changes in the way cis partners interacted with their trans partners’ bodies (Brown, 2010). It was further noted that cis partners renamed their partners’ body parts, for example, breast was renamed chest, which served to show that their cis partners perceived them as men thus “giving” trans men gender and validating their gender identity (Brown 2010). Likewise, Nyamora (2004) and Brown (2010) both found that cis women partners of trans men interacted in ways to show that they saw their partners as men, such as the trans male partner using a harness and dildo, which were both gender identity affirming and disaffirming. Affirming because the dildo became a part of the trans partner but disaffirming because it was a reminder of their physical limitations (Brown, 2010). At the same time both partners seem to drawing on common understandings of what it means to be men (e.g. being sexually dominant, having penetrative sex, not having breasts).

Ward (2010) further suggested gender that can be given to another person through the “labour of forgetting”. She suggested that cis female partners go through the process of forgetting that one’s partner was female by never referring their partner as female in past context as a way to give their trans male partners their masculine gender identity. This seems to be a more conscious way of performing gender, but in this case it is the non-transitioning partner who actively engages in the performance of gender by re-writing their trans partners’ gendered history.

Gender roles in the home also change during a relationship in which the trans partner transitioned. Pfeffer (2010) examined what household and emotional labour revealed about doing gender. Cis women reported that household labour became gendered, with cis women doing more domestic

duties and described how cis women emotionally laboured (e.g. keeping family happy and cared for) for their male partners in a way that revealed stereotypically gendered roles (Pfeffer, 2010). In contrast, Bischof et al. (2011), Aramburu Alegría (2008), and Aramburu Alegría and Ballard-Reisch (2013) found that household work became more balanced amongst trans woman and cis woman couples. For example, household chores were divided by skill by some cis women–trans women couples (Aramburu Alegría, 2008; Aramburu Alegría & Ballard-Reisch, 2013).

Previous research illustrates the idea that gender is a social category of knowledge. Aramburu Alegría and Ballard-Reisch (2013) found that cis partners drew on heteronormative concepts of femininity, reporting that they wanted their partners to look “classy” and to have GRS to remove their penis. Cis partners mentored their trans partners in the ways (e.g. mannerisms, how to dress and apply make-up etc.) of being women (Aramburu Alegría 2008), suggesting that gender is something that can be learned and done but it also suggests that there are socially located expectations of what it means to be a particular gender.

Sexual identity can also be understood as a constructed category of knowledge, contextual and based on the perceptions of others. In order to help their partners be recognized as men, some women made efforts to be more feminine (L. M. Chase, 2011; Pfeffer, 2008, 2014; Ward, 2010). Women who feminised their appearance were read as straight when they were out in public with their partners, thus rendering their queerness invisible (Pfeffer, 2009, 2014). Brown (2009) found that femmes struggled to be recognised as lesbians when alone and before their partners’ transition, due to their feminine appearance but struggled even more when their partners began to be recognised as men.

Passing as straight for lesbian and queer identified women was both beneficial and negative. Sexual identity is important for community membership and sense of belonging for cis women partners of trans people. Many of the cis women partners felt that they did not belong in the communities with which they had previously identified (Aramburu Alegría, 2008; Brown, 2009; Joslin-Roher & Wheeler, 2009; Nyamora, 2004; Pfeffer, 2009, 2014). This was especially salient amongst lesbian and queer-identified women partners of trans men (Brown, 2009; Joslin-Roher &

Wheeler, 2009; Nyamora, 2004; Pfeffer, 2009, 2014). Partners of trans men felt conflicted about being read as straight (Pfeffer, 2009; 2014). On one hand, they were excluded from or felt they did not belong in the lesbian and queer communities because of their apparent heterosexuality (Brown, 2009; Joslin-Roher & Wheeler, 2009; Pfeffer, 2014). This was viewed as a loss because these communities are often a source of support (Pfeffer, 2014). It was also hard to accept by some because it can be difficult to come out as lesbian especially for femmes as they are often misrecognized as straight women, which made it difficult to be accepted by lesbian communities (Joslin-Roher & Wheeler, 2009; Nyamora, 2004; Pfeffer, 2014). Additionally, some cis women partners did not like being part of an apparent straight couple because it exposed them to sexism from their partners and the outside world (Nyamora, 2004). Some partners were afraid that gender inequality would start creeping into the relationship due to their partners' new found maleness and male privilege (Nyamora, 2004).

On the other hand, being read as straight had some advantages. Pfeffer (2014) found that when women partners were read as straight while in public with their trans men partners, it meant that the trans partner's gender identity was validated, which was the goal of the trans partners. In the studies by Brown (2009) and Pfeffer (2009; 2014) it was found that being read as straight gave some couples access to heterosexual privilege and made them feel safe and appear "normal". However, it was mentioned by some cis partners that they did not feel part of the heterosexual world either (Brown, 2009; Pfeffer, 2009).

Conversely, cis women partners of trans women felt that they were perceived as lesbian women as their partners transitioned even though their preferences for partners did not necessarily change (Aramburu Alegría, 2008; 2013). These women saw themselves as marginalized and they often feared judgment from others and felt self-conscious about appearing as part of a lesbian couple. As a result, they employed impression management activities such as ceasing public displays of affection to reduce being read as lesbians. Some of these women felt that they no longer belonged in the straight world and could not belong in the queer world, however, some found comfort in the queer world. They also felt a loss of heterosexual privilege.

Cis women partners experienced confusion around, or struggled with, defining their sexual identity and found themselves being challenged to redefine their sexuality in ways that acknowledge their desires and relationship as their partner transitioned (Aramburu Alegría, 2008, 2013; Bischof et al., 2011; Brown, 2009; Joslin-Roher & Wheeler, 2011; Nyamora, 2004; Pfeffer, 2008, 2009, 2014). Cis partners drew on social understandings of sexuality to define their sexual identities. Some cis women partners of trans men used the term queer because they felt it acknowledged their situation, while some felt that queer was an ambiguous, misunderstood term and avoided using the word queer as an identifier (Pfeffer, 2009, 2014). Partners mentioned that the term queer was more useful than the terms gay or lesbian because it is a term that covers a range of identities (Pfeffer, 2014). Some partners found queer to be limiting because it is a vague term, which they felt was often confused with meaning lesbian for women and gay for men, and that it rendered bisexuality invisible (Pfeffer, 2009). Instead one partner mentioned identifying as bisexual to honour her sexual identity and her partner's male identity (Pfeffer, 2009) and one partner used the term 'open' to show that gender was irrelevant to her sexual preferences (Brown, 2009). Some cis women partners of trans women used terms such as heteroflexible and situational lesbian to accommodate their relationship with their trans partner and desires (Aramburu Alegría, 2008, 2013).

The transition of transgender partners led cisgender partners to re-examine their sexual identities often leading to confusion and struggle around sexuality (Aramburu Alegría, 2008, 2013; Bischof et al., 2011; Joslin-Roher & Wheeler, 2009; Nyamora, 2004; Pfeffer, 2008, 2009, 2014). Aramburu Alegría (2008, 2013) and Nyamora (2004) found that some partners were still attracted to their trans partners despite their previous sexual preference for the gender of their partner before the transition. In the studies by Bischof et al. (2011) and Nyamora (2004), some cisgender partners felt the need to explore their sexuality to see if they were attracted other men (in the cases of partners of trans men) (Nyamora, 2004) or other women (in the case of partners of trans women) (Bischof et al., 2011). Some concluded that they were only attracted to their partner and not to other women (in the cases of partners of trans women) (Bischof et al., 2011), while others found that they were indeed attracted to other trans men and cis men (in the cases of partners of trans men) (Nyamora, 2004).

Partners of trans men also experienced other people questioning their sexual identity (Joslin-Roher & Wheeler, 2009; Pfeffer, 2014). Some partners found explaining or stating their sexual identity problematic and rejected society's desire to know how they identified their sexuality (Pfeffer, 2014). Whereas some worried about what others might assume (in terms of mental health or motivations) about them after coming out as lesbian and then as a person in a relationship with a trans man (Pfeffer, 2014).

Sexual practices and intimacy

The transition of trans partners has also been found to impact on their and their cis partners' sexual practices. Frequency of sexual relations reduced during gender transition. Many couples ceased having sexual relations (Aramburu Alegría, 2008, 2013; Bischof et al., 2011). Some of the cis women partners found that they were no longer sexually attracted to their partners (Aramburu Alegría, 2008; Bischof et al., 2011; Brown, 2010; Nyamora, 2004). Aramburu Alegría (2008) found that cis women stopped having sexual relations with their trans women partners citing that they were strictly heterosexual and therefore not sexually attracted to their partners. Others ceased sexual relations with their partners temporarily because they felt that they needed to settle into the notion that their partners had a new gender identity before they could re-engage in sexual relations with the partner. Cis women partners sometimes found that the transition of partner to male triggered memories of sexual abuse and lessened sexual desire for their partner (Brown, 2010). In some cases, the couples became non-monogamous to work around the issue of non-desire (Brown, 2010).

Many of the cis partners reported that the quality of the sexual intimacy with their trans partners had decreased. Some partners believed that female hormones used for gender transition reduced libido of the trans partners which impacted on their sexual relationship with their cis partners (Aramburu Alegría, 2008; Bischof et al., 2011). Pfeffer (2008) found that body dysphoria (i.e. feeling of discomfort when one's body does not align with their gender identity) of trans men impacted on their partners' body image and consequently on their intimate lives. Partners of trans men mentioned that their trans partners had experienced discomfort in their bodies (due to still having "female" anatomy) and therefore not wanting to share their bodies during sexual intimacy. Trans men were critical of their bodies and this spilled over to their cis partners, making them feel

critical of their bodies and reducing their sexual confidence. Joslin-Roher and Wheeler (2009) and Nyamora (2004) also found that poor body image amongst trans men had a negative impact on sexual intimacy with their partners. Recovery from GRS (Joslin-Roher & Wheeler, 2009), grieving for their partners' former selves, and not seeing their partner as male also had negative impacts on sexual intimacy (Nyamora, 2004).

On the other hand, for some couples sexual intimacy improved. Some cis women partnered with trans men reported that sexual interactions increased and had attributed this to their partners' increased libido due to taking testosterone (Brown, 2010). Cis partners also attributed improvements in sexual intimacy to their partners' enhanced body confidence (Brown, 2010; Joslin-Roher & Wheeler, 2009; Nyamora, 2004). Cis partners also reported that sex improved due to better communication and the emotional presence of their trans partners, which was attributed to their ability to be themselves (Aramburu Alegría, 2008).

Many of the researchers found that sexual practices modified as trans partners transitioned. Aramburu Alegría (2008, 2013) found that sexual practices were modified due to the trans partners' changing bodies and couples engaged in sexual experimentation to accommodate bodily changes. Bischof et al. (2011) also noted approaches to sexual intimacy modified as partners transitioned and some partners redefined what intimacy was to them in terms that were not sexual. Similarly, Joslin-Roher and Wheeler (2009) found that sex roles and sex acts had changed as a result of the gender transition but did not detail what changes had occurred. Brown (2010), Nyamora (2004), Pfeffer (2008) and Ward (2010) noted that cis women partners of trans men changed the way they interacted with their partners in ways that validated their masculinity.

Grief, loss and support

Feelings of loss and grief were common amongst partners of both trans men and trans women. In both Bischof et al.'s (2011) and Nyamora's (2004) studies, participants experienced denial, numbness, anger, shock, grief, sadness and loss, in response to their partners' transition. The participants in L. M. Chase's (2011) study also reported a feeling of loss for who their partners once were as their partners went through a change in appearance and personality. Similarly, Aramburu Alegría and Ballard-Reisch (2013) found that cis partners experienced loss of their

partners as men. In Pfeffer's (2010) study one participant mentioned that they mourned the loss of their partner's former body. Aramburu Alegría (2008) also reported that cis partners felt loss of who their trans women partners once were and the future that they had envisioned together, which seemed more acute when trans partners still had visible traces of masculine features.

The quality of support provided to partners of trans people was mixed. Support came from family, friends, members of LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer) communities, support groups, and other partners of trans people (Bischof et al., 2011; Gurvich, 1991; Joslin-Roher & Wheeler, 2009; Nyamora, 2004). However some partners also felt unwelcome in LGBTQ communities due to "hostility from lesbians who did not support transmale identities for political reasons and/or who felt that the subject was compromising her lesbian/bi/queer identity in partnering with a transman" (Joslin-Roher & Wheeler, 2009, p.42). Others approached friends and family for support, however not all friends and family members were accepting or understanding of the situation, and some partners were rejected by friends and family (Bischof et al., 2011; Gurvich, 1991; Nyamora, 2004). Because of the partners' fear of rejection, it was common for participants to keep their partners' gender identity secret (Bischof et al., 2011; Nyamora, 2004) and to turn to support groups for help (Bischof et al., 2011; Gurvich, 1991). Partners of trans men felt that the support they received from other partners of trans men was important to their ability to cope (Joslin-Roher & Wheeler, 2009).

Other challenges

Being a partner of a trans person presented other challenges. For some, the disclosure of their transgender partners' gender identity elicited adverse emotional responses. Initially some cis partners experienced feelings of shock, betrayal, anger, and disbelief after their partners disclosed their gender identity (Aramburu Alegría, 2008; Gurvich, 1991). One study reported that some participants mentioned that they lost trust in their partners because they had kept their gender identity secret for several years (Gurvich, 1991). Partners also found it difficult to understand what their partners' disclosure meant (Aramburu Alegría, 2008; Gurvich, 1991). Some cis partners reported being depressed, stressed and anxious in relation to the transition of their partners (Gurvich, 1991; Joslin-Roher & Wheeler, 2009). The partners of trans women noted that they needed time to accept their partners' newly disclosed gender identity and therefore limited the

amount of time and when they allowed their partners to present as women (Aramburu Alegría, 2008, 2010; Bischof et al., 2011). Aramburu Alegría (2008) suggested that taking small steps from presenting as men to presenting as women full time, allowed partners to reframe their relational schema (i.e. their understanding and view of their relationship) to accommodate their partners' gender identity. Once they accepted that their partners were women, they actually preferred that their partners presented as women full time because they found it confusing and difficult to cope with when they presented both as men and women.

Many of the participants were partnered with their transitioning partner at the time of the interviews. However, not all cis-trans couples remained together, a small number of relationships dissolved but it is not clear if this was due to the gender transition of the trans partner (Brown, 2007, 2009, 2010; Gurvich, 1991; Joslin-Roher & Wheeler, 2009; Nyamora, 2004; Pfeffer, 2009, 2010, 2014). In Aramburu Alegría's (2008) study, both trans and cis partners evaluated whether they wanted to remain in the relationship. Some participants reported that they were uncertain about whether they wanted to remain with their partner (Bischof et al., 2011; Gurvich, 1991; Nyamora, 2004).

Cis partners of trans people also experienced a shift in relational roles, from partner to mentor, parent and caretaker. Cis partners reported that their trans partners seemed to have experienced a second adolescence. Cis partners found this challenging because their partners became self-centred and they felt that they had to take on parental roles in the relationship (Aramburu Alegría, 2008; L. M. Chase, 2011). Not only did cis partners take on parental type roles, but they also became caretakers of their partners (Joslin-Roher & Wheeler, 2009; Pfeffer, 2010). In Pfeffer's (2010) study, many cis partners acted as personal assistants, medical aides, and emotional supporters to their partners as they transitioned. Many of the cis partners helped their partners through depression and suicidal ideation. It was also common for partners to be involved in their trans partners' post-surgical care. Together this puts mental, physical, and emotional strain on the cis partners, but at the same time it was rewarding for them.

Some cis women partners experienced physical and emotional abuse from their trans men partners (Brown, 2007). Brown (2007) found that participants attributed the abuse they received to the

normal transition process (e.g. due to increases in testosterone and their partners drawing on stereotypical conceptualisations of masculinity) as they had no reference to experiences of other partners or transgender people. It was not until they met other trans men that they realised that their partners' behaviour was abusive. Partners also mentioned that they did not report their partners' behaviours because they feared that others would also attribute the abuse to the gender transition and fuel further transphobia.

Positive elements of gender transition

Being the partner of a person going through a gender transition has positive aspects. In some studies gender transition changed the non-transitioning partners' world view (Aramburu Alegría, 2008) and led them to reflect on their beliefs around love, intimacy and companionship (Bischof et al., 2011). The transition prompted cis partners to experience personal growth (Aramburu Alegría, 2008; Bischof et al., 2011) – they felt more open minded, understanding and assertive (Aramburu Alegría, 2008). Due to the transition, trans partners were able to be themselves, trans partners felt happier and cis partners were able to share this joy (Bischof et al., 2011; Joslin-Roher & Wheeler, 2009). Cis partners felt more intimate with and trusted by their trans partners (Gurvich, 1991). Also communication, problem solving and honesty within the relationship had improved (Aramburu Alegría, 2008; Joslin-Roher & Wheeler, 2009). In addition, partners engaged in new activities together. Partners enjoyed shopping together (Bischof et al., 2011), and became involved in educating the community about transgender issues (Aramburu Alegría, 2008).

Current study and research aims

To summarise the findings, it has been found that many partners go through a process of renegotiating their sexual identity in ways that reflect their sexual preferences and their relationship with their trans partners (Aramburu Alegría, 2008, 2013; Bischof et al., 2011; Joslin-Roher & Wheeler, 2009; Nyamora, 2004; Pfeffer, 2008, 2009, 2014). Often sexual intimacy changes, those who are partnered with trans men found that sexual interactions became more gendered (Brown, 2010; Pfeffer, 2008; Ward, 2010) and sometimes sexual interactions decline or cease completely (Aramburu Alegría, 2008, 2013; Bischof et al., 2011). Those partnered with trans men may experience a shift in gender roles where they become stereotypically gendered (Pfeffer, 2010) whereas partners of trans women found that their roles became more equal (Aramburu

Alegría, 2008; Aramburu Alegría & Ballard-Reisch, 2013; Bischof et al., 2011). Many partners grieved for the loss of their trans partners' former selves. However, very little of this research examines the wider social implications of being a partner of a transitioning transgender person, how gender transition impacts their world view, how it changes them, and how they experience the "coming out" as a partner of a trans person.

An important critique is that most studies drew on samples of predominantly white, North American women (Aramburu Alegría, 2008, 2010, 2013; Aramburu Alegría & Ballard-Reisch, 2013; Brown, 2007, 2009, 2010; L. M. Chase, 2011; Joslin-Roher & Wheeler, 2009; Nyamora, 2004; Pfeffer, 2008, 2009, 2010, 2014). None of the reviewed studies include the voices of cis men (although there may be unpublished research that has included cis men partners of trans people). Only six of the 17 reviewed studies examined the experiences of heterosexual women (Aramburu Alegría, 2008, 2010, 2013; Aramburu Alegría & Ballard-Reisch, 2013; Bischof et al., 2011; Gurvich, 1991). To date there is no published New Zealand based research on experiences of the partners of transgender people making their transition. The voices of people of colour, and those with less education have been largely ignored. It is important to have diversity in study samples to give understudied groups' voices and to enhance understanding of the impact of transition of partners from diverse backgrounds. Gender transition could be different for these people and their partners. How far a trans person can transition physically in New Zealand depends on their financial status, physical health and mental health. Gender transition can be an expensive process (especially if trans people want GRS) and therefore inaccessible for some. Trans people also need to be assessed by psychologists, psychiatrists, endocrinologists and general practitioners before they can transition using hormones and surgery (Ministry of Health, 2014), which is expensive. GRS also pose some health risks for some people (Ministry of Health, 2014). Before trans people are allowed to go ahead for surgery they need to be deemed to be mentally well (Ministry of Health, 2014), which could exclude some people.

The studies such as Brown (2009, 2010), Pfeffer (2009, 2014), Bischof et al. (2011), Gurvich (1991), and Nyamora (2004) discuss the experiences of cis partners in more depth, however they are primarily aimed at examining commonly explored topics such sexual identity of the cis partners, sexual intimacy of couples, and general experiences of cis partners during their partners'

gender transition. Alegría Aramburu (2008), Alegría Aramburu and Ballard-Reisch (2013), Brown (2007), Pfeffer (2008, 2010), and Ward (2010) also provided fuller explanations of their findings by examining wider topics such as: relational maintenance activities used by couples during gender transition; gender expression of people in cis-trans relationships; verbal and physical abuse experienced by cis women partners from their trans men partners; the impact of the trans men partners' body image on their cis women partners; what household and emotional labour reveals about performing gender; and how femmes give gender to their trans men partners. It would be useful to examine the aforementioned topics from the perspective of heterosexual cis women and cis men of varying cultures and education. It would also be helpful to examine the wider social implications of being a partner of a trans person. For example, how do cis partners come out to others as partners of trans people? What do the cis partners experience when they come out to their families, friends, work colleagues, et cetera? How do they understand their coming out experience? How does the gender transition of partners impact the worldview of cisgender partners? How does gender transition change the non-transitioning partner?

In conclusion, there is still relatively little research in this topic area, and the few studies that have been conducted used semi-structured interviews with small samples of participants (ranging between five and 50 participants) and were based mostly in the USA and Canada. These participants were both former and current partners (at the time of the interviews) of trans people during at least some of their gender transition, some of whom were not partnered prior to disclosure of their trans status. All participants (except one) were women, ranging from 18 to 69 years of age, most were white, and some were parents. To date there is no published research on this topic in New Zealand. Therefore, in this study I explore the experiences of cisgender former and current partners of people transitioning to their self-identified gender during their relationship in a New Zealand context. The aim is to gather knowledge on how people residing in New Zealand experience the gender transition of their partners, thus building on the current knowledge base of non-transitioning partners' experiences. This study also aims to explore how the experience impacts on their relationship with their trans partner, changes to their sexual identities, personal qualities and worldviews, along with how they experienced the "coming out" (i.e. the public disclosure of their trans identity) process as partners of trans people.

Chapter two: Methodology and method

In this chapter I describe the methodology and methods used for the current research. I provide a rationale for my chosen analytic approach (i.e. interpretative phenomenological analysis, IPA), discuss the ethical considerations of this research, and provide a detailed account of how my positioning as the researcher could have potentially influenced this study and the findings.

Methodology

Epistemology

This study is grounded in the epistemology of social constructionism. From a constructionist standpoint, objects do not inherently hold knowledge; that is, there is no objective truth waiting to be discovered within objects, but instead knowledge or meaning is constructed from the interaction of human beings and objects (Crotty, 1998). It suggests that meaning only exists when there is consciousness (Crotty, 1998). Meaning is socially and historically dependent in which our culture shapes the way we perceive particular objects and phenomena (Burr, 2003; Crotty, 1998). Thus social constructionism assumes that the same phenomena can be interpreted differently by different people in different contexts and therefore be given varying meanings (Crotty, 1998).

Social constructionism is compatible with the topic area of the current study. The study aims to explore the experiences and the coming out experience of partners of people transitioning to a different gender with the intention of gaining a better insight of their worlds. The study also aims to explore how gender transition of one partner in a relationship affects their relationship and other cis partner in terms of their personal qualities, sexual identity and worldviews. The intention of these aims is gain a better insight into how cis partners might experience the transition of their partner. Social constructionism recognises that the same phenomena can be interpreted differently by different people in different contexts and therefore have different understandings of the same phenomena (Crotty, 1998). Additionally, social constructionism holds that there is no one valid or true interpretation, just interpretations with different functions and varying degrees of usefulness (Crotty, 1998). Social constructionism allows us to recognise that each participant can have different and equally valid understandings of their experiences of their partners' transition. This is helpful because it allows us to broaden our understandings of cis partner experiences of gender transition.

Social constructionist epistemology is also compatible with the theoretical framework that guides the current study. According to Queer Theory and Feminist Theory, sexual and gender identities are understood to be socially constructed (Jagoes, 1996; Rich, 2007; Sandstrom et al, 2014; Spargo, 1999). We assign meaning and identity labels to particular groups of acts, stylisations, mannerisms (Butler, 1990, 1999). However these actions can be interpreted differently depending on social context, therefore given a different identity label or no identity label at all depending on the meaning given to these actions (Caifia, 2005; Foucault, 1978; Jagoes, 1996; Sedgwick, 1990). Additionally, gender and sexual identities are not properties that are within people (Butler, 1990, 1999). Instead these identities are formed and performed through our interactions with the social world and in accordance to social rules (Butler, 1990, 1999).

Analytic approach: Interpretative phenomenological analysis

In this study, I am interested how people experience the gender transition of their partners. More specifically, I want to explore how this experience impacts on their relationship with their trans partner, changes to their sexual identities, personal qualities and worldviews, along with how they experienced the “coming out” (i.e. the public disclosure of their trans identity) process as partners of trans people. In order to explore these aims, I have selected interpretative phenomenological analysis to frame the data collection and analysis in this study. I justify my selection in the paragraphs below.

IPA is a methodology used to examine the lived experiences of a particular phenomenon and is grounded in a social constructionist epistemology (Crotty, 1998; Larkin, Watts, & Clifton, 2006), and influenced by theoretical frameworks of phenomenology, hermeneutics and idiography (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). IPA researchers have two aims. First, to view the phenomenon from the perspectives of the participants in an attempt to understand and describe their experiences (Larkin et al., 2006). Secondly, to understand how people make sense of their experiences (Eatough & Smith, 2008; Larkin et al., 2006; Smith et al., 2009; Tuohy, Cooney, Dowling, Murphy, & Sixsmith, 2013). IPA is suitable for exploring the study aims because it is phenomenological. IPA is influenced by the ideas of phenomenological theorists, Husserl and Heidegger, who thought that IPA should be concerned with identifying the essence of human

experiences (Larkin et al., 2006; Smith et al., 2009). Modern IPA focuses on the experiences which have significance to people, rather than on the ordinary (Smith et al., 2009) and it endeavours to reveal human experience of a phenomenon in its own terms and how people understand their experiences (Larkin et al., 2006). Thus IPA is concerned with examining the subjective experiences of a significant phenomenon including emotional and cognitive responses, such as feelings, thoughts, and memories, which form part of the experience (Smith et al., 2009). IPA is therefore suitable for this study. I aimed to gain better insight into the cis partner experiences of their partners' gender transition, which meant exploring their experiences as they understood them and looking at how they felt and thought about the transition and its implications for them and their relationships.

IPA is also idiographic and used to examine experiences in a very detailed, in-depth, and thorough manner (Larkin et al., 2006; Smith et al., 2009). IPA is useful for this study because it is designed to examine experiences of a specific occurrence in a detailed manner (Larkin et al., 2006; Smith et al., 2009), which aligned very well with my study topic. Because IPA focuses on the specific, only small sample sizes are needed and the participant criteria can be very specific (Larkin et al., 2006; Smith et al., 2009). Smaller numbers allow for detailed accounts and analysis, providing insight, which contributes to our understanding of experiences of very specific phenomenon (Smith et al., 2009). Again IPA was well suited to the subject matter because it is designed to for detailed accounts. By gathering detailed accounts, I was able to gain a deeper insight in the existential accounts of the participants and contribute to the overall understanding of their experiences (Smith et al., 2009).

IPA is also influenced by hermeneutics (Smith et al., 2009). Hermeneutics is built on the ideas of Gadamer, Heidegger and Schleiermacher (Larkin et al., 2006; Smith et al., 2009). Heidegger (1996) holds that accounts of experiences have visible, explicit meanings as well as hidden meanings and these can be unveiled by interpretation. Heidegger (1996) suggests that our interpretation of a phenomenological account is influenced by our foreconceptions (i.e. prior experiences, assumptions, preconceptions), which filter the way we view and understand our worlds. Thus Heideggerian phenomenology only allows us to get an approximation of what it is like to experience a particular phenomenon (Larkin et al., 2006). Crotty (1998) suggests that common

ground between a participant and researcher also helps the researcher interpret the participants' account. Therefore preconceptions can both help us understand the deeper meanings of an account, but at the same time they can cloud our understandings. Gadamer (1975) agrees and claims that preconceptions influence the interpretation of accounts which both hinder and help the interpretation process.

The hermeneutic circle is an important concept in IPA. It is the idea that we cannot understand the parts of something without looking at the whole and we cannot understand the whole without understanding its parts (Smith et al., 2009). During the analysis this means alternating between examining an account from the outside and then from within. IPA employs a double hermeneutic (Smith & Osborn, 2003) which is when the researcher tries to make sense of the participant making sense of an experience. The researcher has a dual role in that they are both like and unlike the participant (Smith et al, 2009). In one way the researcher is like the participant, drawing on everyday resources to make sense of the world (Smith et al, 2009). On the other hand they are not like the participant, as they only have access to the experience as the participant reports it, and views the experience through the eyes of a researcher (Smith et al., 2009). IPA operates as a double hermeneutic in another way, in which the researcher wants to get an insider's perspective of the phenomenon (Conrad, 1987) but at the same time seeks to study the phenomenon from the outside, from a different angle (Smith & Osborn, 2003).

Phenomenological theorists suggest that we need to examine existential accounts with a critical eye. Gadamer (1975) suggests that we can enhance our understandings of an account by being reflexive. In other words, our understanding of an account could be enhanced by examining the account from different angles, being aware of our biases and how they could impact our understanding. One phenomenological theorist, Schleiermacher (1998), recommends drawing on the wider context of the account in which it was originally produced to help increase our understanding of an existential account. Similarly, Larkin et al. (2006) draws on Heidegger's idea that people are embedded within their world and can only be meaningfully understood in the context of their worlds, a concept Heidegger calls *people-in-context*.

IPA is appropriate for this current study and compatible with social constructionism because it

acknowledges that the researcher plays an active role in the interpretation of the data. IPA assumes that in order for the researcher to understand the experiences of participants, they must accept that their understanding comes from their engagement and interpretation of the participant's accounts (Willig, 2008). IPA assumes that biases, preconceptions and experiences of the researcher are required for understanding (Gadamer, 1975; Heidegger, 1996) but can also hinder that understanding of participant accounts (Larkin et al., 2006). I have been through a similar lived experience to my participants. As I outline below, my own experience and positioning have impacted my research, including selecting this topic to study, as well as the way I interacted with the participants, interpreted their words and analysed and made sense of the data. Having this experience means that I am able to build rapport with participants and understand the participants in ways that other people might not. However, my experience has the potential to cloud my understandings of the participants' experiences because not all participants understood their experiences in the same way as I did. As mentioned by Crotty (1998), the same phenomenon can be experienced in differently by different people. Thus, it is important to be reflexive and open minded in my approach to the data analysis, which is encouraged by IPA (Gadamer, 1975; Larkin et al., 2006).

In addition to using IPA, I asked participants to bring items such as photographs or diaries to the interviews. Collier Jr. (1957) reported that photographs can aid rapport between participants and researchers can produce richer data. Photographs and other items, and can complement IPA methods. According to Willig (2013), visuals can provide a window into the lifeworlds of the participants. Having the participants speak about visuals can help enrich interview data. The use of photographs can also act as memory aides (Harper, 2002) and elicit and enrich narratives (Sheridan & Chamberlain, 2011). Asking participants about their visual data can help add depth to interviews by allowing them to speak about their personal experiences (Willig, 2013). Material objects, particularly diaries, films and photographs, also provide visual insight into the past experiences of the participants and provide material evidence of the participant's claims of lived experience (Sheridan & Chamberlain, 2011).

Research quality

In this section I will discuss how the quality of this study could be assessed. de Witt and Ploeg (2006) and Smith (2011) suggest that good research should be transparent. Research should allow the reader to be able to trace decisions made leading to the findings (Koch, 1994; Sandelowski, 1986; Smith, 2011) and there should be clear rationales for theoretical, methodological and analytical choices that frame the research (Sandelowski 1986). Koch and Harrington (1998) and Horsburgh (2003) stress the importance of being reflexive in qualitative research. Koch and Harrington (1998) suggest that researchers provide a reflexive account to allow readers to see how the research is shaped by the researcher's background and decide for themselves whether the research is plausible. This is provided in the section on 'reflexivity' below.

Specific to IPA, Smith (2011) suggests that good research should clearly demonstrate the core principles of IPA – it should be phenomenological, hermeneutic and idiographic. Smith (2011) also suggests that good research should have sufficient evidence to support the emergent themes. For samples of four to eight participants, Smith (2011) advises that there should be least one extract from at least three participants per theme.

Method

Study design

In this study I conducted face-to-face, audio recorded, semi-structured interviews with six current and former partners of people who went through a gender transition. Transcripts were analysed using IPA.

Participants

Six participants took part in this study. Participants were aged 21 to 39 years of age, five participants were cis women and one was a cis man, and five participants identified as non-heterosexual. None of the participants had children except for one participant who was a parent to three children (Amanda). Participants' demographic information, gender and sexual identities that they identified with, and detail regarding their relationships, is provided in Table 1.

Table 1. *Participants' demographics, identities, and relationship information*

<i>Pseudonym</i>	Alice	Dean	Amanda	Sonja	Emily	Lisa
<i>Ethnicity of participant</i>	European	European	Kiwi, European, Danish	NZ European, Danish	NZ European	Pākehā
<i>Age</i>	25	21	39	23	28	25
<i>Education level</i>	Master's student	University student	Bachelor's degree	Bachelor's degree	Tertiary level	University level
<i>Main occupation</i>	Student	Student	Accountant	Support worker	Bar tender	Community sector worker
<i>Gender identity of participant</i>	Cis woman	Cis male	Cis female	Cis female	Cis female	Cis woman
<i>Sexual identity of participant prior to / during and after transition</i>	Lesbian / Queer	Pansexual / Pansexual with a stronger preference for males	Predominately heterosexual / Heterosexual	Gay / Gay	Undefined / Undefined	Femme lesbian / Queer, femme lesbian and then femme lesbian
<i>Gender identity of partner prior to / at disclosure of trans identity</i>	Woman / Man	Male / Feminine, female	Male / Transgender female	Gender neutral / Masculine, gender neutral	Woman / Transgender man	Woman / Trans man
<i>Status of relationship with trans partner</i>	Separated	Separated	Separated	With trans partner	With trans partner	Separated
<i>Length of relationship</i>	2.5 years	3 months	13 years	6 months	3.5 years	3 years
<i>Time since separation</i>	Not recorded	2 years	6-8 months	NA	NA	3 years
<i>Time into the relationship that the partner's trans identity was disclosed</i>	2 years	Prior to the start of the relationship when romantically interested	10 years	Early in the relationship	3 years	A few months

Participant recruitment

I recruited participants using my own personal networks. One participant was an acquaintance of mine, referred to me by their current partner. The Internet is an effective medium to reach sexual and gender minorities (Rosser, Oakes, Bockting, & Miner, 2007; Shapiro, 2004) and for this reason

I used social media to recruit participants. I also advertised the study on flyers at cafes and libraries and on my personal Facebook, Tumblr and Twitter pages. The study advertisement flyer (Appendix A) was shared amongst friends and acquaintances via social media. Respondents emailed me and used Facebook Messenger to express their interest in taking part. I followed up their responses by emailing them or using Facebook Messenger to forward them the information sheet (see Appendix B) and ask if they were still interested. Once they had agreed to take part, I telephoned them to arrange a time and place to conduct the interview. During the phone call I went over the information sheet and inclusion criteria. Participants were invited to bring items (such as photos, diaries etc.) that were relevant to their experience of the partners' gender transition to the interview if they wanted. After each phone call I followed up the phone conversation with an email confirming the interview time, date and location. Emails or text messages were sent to the participants a day before the interview reminding the participants of the interview time, date and location and to bring material objects if they wish.

To recruit participants, I also emailed Agender, Tranzform (both are support groups for trans people and their allies) and the Straight Spouse Network (SNN - a support group for partners of trans people and those who are straight and partnered with gay/lesbian people) with the details of my study (see Appendices I, J and K) inviting members to participate if eligible and requesting that members could pass information about the study to anyone who is eligible to participate. All groups wished to help with the study and forwarded the study details to organisation members. Some of the participants were recruited via Tranzform. Other members were willing to help but they did not meet the participant criteria and were therefore not included in the study.

Two participants did not strictly meet the criteria but were included in the study nevertheless to provide broader and valuable perspectives. Dean did not entirely fit my project criteria as Dean's partner identified as trans female/feminine for the duration of the relationship but he was romantically interested in his partner prior to their trans identity disclosure. He had a different understanding of gender transition than I did. In this thesis I defined gender transition as when a person begins to identify as a different gender to the gender they were assigned at birth, but Dean saw gender transition as the beginning of hormone replacement therapy (HRT). Dean perceived himself as fitting the criteria and he was very willing to share his experiences, which is important.

I was not aware of this difference in definition prior to the interview. Sonja was partnered with someone transitioning from gender neutral to a more masculine identity. In this thesis I considered a gender neutral person as part of the transgender continuum as they do not identify with the gender they were assigned at birth. However Sonja was included in the study because she knew her partner as one gender at the beginning of the relationship and as her partner is going through a gender transition, this provides a unique account of the non-transitioning partner's experience of their partner's gender transition.

Data collection procedure

Prior to the interviewing process, I discussed cultural issues that could arise during the interviews with a kaumātua from Lifeline. He felt that my approach to interviewing was culturally sensitive. He provided advice on how to interact with participants during the interviews. Suggestions included: being respectful; being attentive to the participants' body language and adjusting tone of voice and body language when needed to make participants feel at ease; making participants feel welcome; and offering food and drinks. During the interviews I made use of these suggestions during the interviews to the best of my ability.

I interviewed the participants in private spaces. Three participants were interviewed in the meeting rooms at a university library, two interviews took place in a meeting room at a tertiary institution, and one interview took place at the participant's work place in a private space.

Before any data were collected all participants were given information sheets (Appendix B) (provided electronically via email or as a hard copy in person during the recruitment period) to read before the interview. Information sheets were reviewed just prior to the interviews and participants were invited to ask any questions. Participants confirmed their consent to participate by signing the consent form (Appendix C) before we began the interview. Participants were provided with food and drink during the interview, a hard copy of the information sheet detailing the study, a sheet detailing the contact details of support services (Appendix E) and a \$30 Prezzie card (as an appreciation of the participants' time and sharing their personal experiences) at the start of the meeting.

The semi-structured interviews were audio-recorded. I started by asking the participants a few contextual questions and then I moved on to questions regarding their experience of their partners' transition. The interview schedule, which I used as a guide to generate dialogue with the participant, is detailed in Appendix F. During the interview I asked participants to describe themselves; their gender identity; their partner's gender identity; their sexual identity; their relationship before and during the transition of their partner; how the gender transition impacted on them and their world view; and how they experienced the disclosure of their status as a partner of a trans person. Only one participant brought a material object to the interview. She brought a photo album and I asked her to talk about the photos to prompt discussion about her relationship prior to her partner's transition and general experiences of her partner's transition. During the interviews, care was taken not to use discriminatory language when referring to transgender partners (e.g. I used neutral pronouns when referring to trans partners until the participant stated the partner's gender identity). Correct pronouns and chosen names of transgender partners of participants were used. The interviews lasted between 43 and 81 minutes.

Data management and transcription

I recorded each interview using the voice recording application on my PIN protected Samsung Galaxy S4 Mini smart phone. I saved the audio files on my personal password protected laptop and backed up these files on my personal Google Drive account, which is password protected and provided these files to my supervisors. Audio files were deleted after the project was completed, and copies of the transcripts will be destroyed after five years. Consent forms will be stored for five years by my primary supervisor under lock and key in accordance with Massey University guidelines.

I transcribed each interview as soon as possible after the interview. I used Express Scribe Transcription Software v 5.74 to transcribe the recordings. The participant who brought a photo album to her interview gave short narratives of the memories that the photos triggered and these comments were transcribed as verbatim as I did with the other interviews. The sharing of her photo album was not noted in any other way on her transcript. I allocated the participants with pseudonyms and all other identifying information was omitted from the transcripts to protect the

privacy of the participants.

Prior to data analysis, each participant was emailed an electronic version of their transcript in the form of a Microsoft Word file and given an opportunity to read and edit their interview transcripts. They then read and signed the transcript release authority form (Appendix D), which I provided to the participants as a PDF file in the email along with the electronic transcripts. One participant edited their transcript by correcting two spelling errors and one misheard word.

Ethical considerations

This project was carried out in accordance to the Massey University code of ethical conduct for research, teaching and evaluations involving human participants (Massey University, 2015) and it has been approved by the Massey University Human Ethics Committee (Southern B, Application 15/19 [Appendix H]) in May 2015. The key ethical issues in this research are discussed below.

Recruiting participants through personal networks was a concern because there was potential that I could have been acquainted with some of the participants before the study and they may have been worried about anonymity and confidentiality. These personal connections are difficult to avoid because New Zealand is relatively small in population. Consequently, one of the participants was an acquaintance of mine, and two other participants were friends of my acquaintances, but I had not met them until they were interviewed. However, I informed these participants fully about the research, and reassured them about anonymity, prior to their participation.

I welcomed all eligible people, including Māori, to participate in the research. I was careful to frame my recruitment advertisement in a way that encourages all eligible people to participate. This means using inclusive terminology. Transgender people may not identify as transgender and their partners may not identify them as transgender either. In some cultures the word transgender (or variations of this such as trans or transsexual) may be not used. Therefore, in the advertisement I described what I meant by transgender and I asked a Māori cultural consultant to review my recruitment advertisement. The consultant was supportive of my research proposal and recruitment advertisement and offered his expertise throughout the duration of my project, as outlined in his letter of support (Appendix G). However, I did not encounter any participants who identify as an

ethnicity vastly different to my own Pākehā/New Zealand European ethnicity and therefore I did not approach a cultural consultant.

I was concerned that the interview topic and questions may trigger unpleasant memories of participants' experiences and cause them to become upset. As many of the questions related to the relationship of the participant and their partner, the interview process had potential to surface problems in their relationship. Additionally, many of the questions asked about the intimate details of the participants' lives and I was concerned that they may have felt uncomfortable speaking about these to someone they did not know. Fortunately, the participants I interviewed seemed willing to speak openly about their experiences. I did stop one interview briefly as a participant became visibly upset and before restarting the interview I asked if they were ready to continue. Most of the participants did mention that they or their partner had experienced mental health issues. However, these experiences occurred in the past and they had used the services of counsellors and psychologists to help them.

My emotional wellbeing was of concern because the interviews had the potential to trigger distressful memories. In the case of having negative reactions, I felt I could contact my own clinical psychologist and my supervisors to discuss these reactions if necessary. However I did not experience any distress during the interview, transcription or data analysis processes. During the interviews, I felt a sense of understanding, for example when the participants described how they questioned their sexual identity, I felt that I could relate to their experience. I felt the sadness in their voices during the transcription process possibly because the recordings are slowed down and I was better able to focus on their stories. One of the interviews was very uplifting, which I had not expected. Although the transition was difficult in some respects for this participant, overall the transition had greatly improved their relationship with their partner and their partner's life.

Reflexivity

This study is grounded in social constructionism and IPA. With this grounding in mind, it is assumed that the researcher influences the outcome of the research. Social constructionism assumes "that meanings are constructed by human beings as they engage with the world they are

interpreting” (Crotty, 1998, p.43). That is, knowledge arises from an interaction between the researcher and the participants. IPA acknowledges that the researcher’s existing knowledge, assumptions, bias and preconceptions influence how the participants’ experiences are interpreted (Tuohy et al., 2013). Thus it is important that I discuss my background and its potential to impact on my research.

I am a 30 year old, heteroflexible, cis woman, Pākehā/New Zealander with British heritage based in Wellington. I am currently separated from my civil union partner who transitioned from male to female during our nine year relationship. During my former partner’s gender transition I felt that the experience and wellbeing of the non-transitioning partner was often overlooked because they appeared not to be going through a life transition. Much of the focus was on the transitioning partner. I also felt that there was a lack of understanding of the cis partner’s experience from peers, friends and family. Thus it was my personal experience that prompted my exploration of the experiences of other partners of people transitioning to a different gender.

Having had a similar experience to the participants, I felt that it was easier to build rapport with them especially after disclosing my personal experience (after they had asked what prompted me to study this topic). I felt that I had a better understanding of the participants’ experience than outsiders. There were many instances during the interviews that I had a sense of knowing, because what they had said to me was similar to my experiences. There were some times during the interviews that their experiences were not personally familiar to me but there was still a sense that I comprehended the complexity and difficulty of their experiences. However, at the same time, I feel that my own experiences could cause me to overlook any differences between our experiences.

I was similar to the participants in other ways, which I think also helped build rapport and understanding. I was around the same age of the participants. The youngest was 21 years old and the oldest was 39 years old, with the other four being in their twenties. All of the participants had some level of tertiary education, all identified as Pākehā/European, five identified as cis women, and they all seemed to have fairly compatible world views to my own.

Where the participants and I seemed to have differed the most was in our sexual identities. Two

identified as having no sexual or romantic preference for a particular gender or pansexual, and three as lesbian, gay or queer. Having previously identified as straight and at the time of the research as heteroflexible (or bisexual or queer, depending on the circumstances and who I am speaking with), my experience differed quite a bit from their experiences. I had been visibly straight and a part of mainstream world for most of my life. Up until my former partner's disclosure of her trans identity status to her friends and family, and prior to her transition, I did not have to "come out" or face external stigma and marginalisation surrounding my sexual identity that I imagine that visibly non-heterosexual people have experienced. After my former partner came out as trans, I experienced internalised stigma and because of this I have avoided coming out as a partner of a trans person to most of my family and acquaintances who knew me as the partner of a man.

Prior to conducting the research I had read extensively about the experiences of partners of people transitioning to a different gender. All of the research I had read examined the experiences of cis women partners and most of them were partnered with trans men. My understanding of the experiences of partners was based on this research and my own experience. These understandings were on my mind during the interview process and it influenced the probing questions I asked and how I interpreted the data. The types of probing questions used had the potential to elicit different information. Some of the questions were based on previous research to check if the participants' experiences were similar to those in the literature. My personal experiences and knowledge may have meant that I had trouble seeing the participants' experiences from different perspectives. To counter this I made active efforts to view their experiences in different ways.

During the data analysis I could see the double hermeneutic operating. I was both like and unlike the participants. As mentioned earlier, I was similar to the participants in that I too had witnessed a partner transition to a different gender. I felt that I had an insider's insight into their experiences and I could understand what they went through. At the same time, I was different to the participants. Yes, we had experienced a partner changing their gender identity, but how we felt about it and understood it was different. I found myself cycling between what their accounts personally made me feel and what I think they felt and made of their experiences. It was difficult process to balance, I had to keep reminding myself to put myself in the participants' shoes not just my own.

I kept a journal to record my personal reflections of each interview including how I felt and how the interview went. As I have experienced a similar phenomenon to my participants it was important to record my personal reflections of the interviews. These personal reflections helped with my interpretations of the participants' experiences and made it clearer how my experiences shaped the interview, and how I made sense of the transcripts.

Data analysis procedure

The data was analysed by using an IPA approach outlined by Larkin (2015) and Smith et al. (2009). Immediately after each interview I made a journal entry detailing how I felt during the interview, how well the interview went, my reflections and any other comments that I felt necessary to include. During the transcription, I made notes on the similarities between participants and on their demographic details. Once the transcripts were completed, I read each transcript and re-listened to the interviews to become immersed in the data, and I recorded any useful, salient recollections of the interviews (Smith et al., 2009).

Next, I read through my journal entries and then I started making notes on the transcripts. This initial note taking process involved the following steps: I recorded any initial ideas I had (Larkin, 2015) and what came to mind when reading certain words or phrases (Smith et al., 2009); I made notes describing the content (Smith et al., 2009); I highlighted important text and explained why I thought it was important (Smith et al., 2009); I made notes on how language was used (Smith et al., 2009); I examined how each participant understood their experiences (Smith et al., 2009) and made notes on what matters to the participants and what these may mean by drawing on my own experiences and knowledge to interpret the data (Larkin, 2015); and I also reflected on my preconceptions and considered their influence on how I interpreted the data (Larkin, 2015).

Once I had completed the above steps, I moved to the next participant's transcript and tried to bracket off findings from the previous case and allow new themes to emerge (Smith et al., 2009). I then examined the initial codes that emerged from each transcript. I identified, summarised and labelled common patterns within and across transcripts (Larkin, 2015). I then organised the codes

into superordinate themes, themes and sub themes based on similarities in function. I made sure that they captured the meaning of the material they related to and that there was sufficient evidence to support them (Larkin, 2015). After this, I wrote a narrative of the interpretations of the cases with evidence from the data that takes the reader through the interpretation, theme-by-theme (Smith et al., 2009). The next chapter will discuss the results of these interpretations.

Chapter three: Results and discussion

In this chapter, the major themes from the accounts of the six participants will be discussed. Three superordinate themes and nine subthemes were identified during the in-depth IPA on the transcripts across the accounts of the six participants. These superordinate themes were: “Coming Out as a Process”; “Support”; “Changes to Self and the Relationship”. These themes represent the time from the participants’ learning of their partners’ trans identity to the processes that follow from that point onwards. The superordinate themes and their subthemes are outlined in Table 2. Each will be described and discussed in turn in this chapter. The findings will be presented and discussed in terms of their how they link to previous research.

Table 2. Superordinate themes and subthemes

<i>Superordinate themes</i>	Coming out as a process	Support	Changes to self and the relationship
<i>Subthemes</i>	Private and intimate disclosure	Barriers to getting adequate support	Change in self: personal qualities, behaviour, worldviews and knowledge
	Public disclosure	Getting support and supporting self	Changes to personal and relationship sexual identity
		Being supportive	Changes to sexual intimacy
			Changes in the nature and quality of the relationship

Coming out as a process

The first superordinate is the largest in this study as it captured much of the participants’ accounts of their experiences. This superordinate theme covers two subthemes: “Private and Intimate Disclosure” and “Public Disclosure”. These two subthemes cover the two stages of the coming out process: the private and intimate disclosure in which the trans person came out to their partner, and when the trans partner and participant came out to those outside of the relationship as a cis-trans couple. Both of these themes will be discussed in turn.

Private and intimate disclosure

This subtheme is about how the participants experienced the coming out of their trans partner in the personal and intimate space of their relationship. These experiences included emotional and cognitive responses and wider sense making that occurred during this often lengthy period. Most participants reported that disclosure of their partners' trans identity was a lengthy process, spanning from weeks to years, similar to previous research (Aramburu Alegría, 2008). For some participants, disclosure was staggered with trans partners moving through a continuum of gender identities during the disclosure period. Typically, trans partners moved from cisgender, to a non-binary transgender identity (e.g. genderqueer, crossdresser, gender neutral) before becoming aware of their current gender identity. This staggered disclosure of gender identity was consistent with Bischof et al.'s (2011) study who found that all trans partners initially identified as crossdressers before coming out as transsexual. The trans partners in Aramburu Alegría's (2008) study noted that the gradual nature of their disclosure was due to their slow discovery of their preferred gender identity. It also appeared that partners of the participants in the current study also went through a process of discovery, which could explain the slow process of disclosure amongst the participants in the current study.

This intimate disclosure was a joint process between the participant and their trans partner as most participants were involved in their partners' disclosure and discovery of their trans identity. One participant was involved in her partner's exploration of their gender identity but not with the private disclosure of their partner's trans identity. This participant spent time learning about different gender identities with her partner, which eventually led to her partner's discovery of their preferred gender. Three participants prompted conversations that led to their partners' disclosure as transgender, after realising that their partners were experiencing difficulties in their gender identity or sexual intimacy. Amanda's account demonstrated the drawn out and shared process of private disclosure. For Amanda the process was twofold, she first initiated conversations that led to her partner's disclosure as a crossdresser. Years later, Amanda read about transgenderism and realised that her partner might be trans and shared her thoughts and her reading material with her partner, which led to her partner's disclosure as trans, as shown in the quote below:

¹Amanda: in 2000-beginning of 2011...I got referred to a psychologist, antidepressants, and that's the first time I really brought up the crossdressing with anyone outside of the relationship. And um, my psychologist recommended a book called Whipping Girl by Julia Serano. And I read the book and then [laughs], I said... "[ex-partner's former name] this is you"... it just gave me an insight into what, um, had been going on with [ex-partner] and the cross dressing and the gender stuff. I was just, yeah, just opened my eyes to, um, whole transition and I said, [ex-partner's former name] read the book after. And was also quite affected by it... didn't want it to be the truth, you know because it's kind of like scary. Um, and then since talking to my psychologist afterwards and that we've both read the book, and what we were thinking, she recommended, um, [ex-partner] to go see [name of a gender counsellor]...and um, working through, her gender issues and it all snowballed from there pretty much. Um, so what was that? 2011?

Sonja's comments also illustrated the shared and slow process of her partner's disclosure of their trans identity.

Sonja: I guess actually it happened in like a series of conversations
 Interviewer: = Yeah.
 Sonja: like I'd talk to them about being uncomfortable and they told me that they just didn't identify with their chest the way it was and felt just uncomfortable with it and then it was later down the track, I can't remember how we led into the conversation but they said that they felt probably more gender male, was how they said it.

Likewise, Emily also described the slow and joint process of her partner's disclosure.

Emily: ...when he first, yeah when he-we were actually in the supermarket when he first brought it up. He sort of mentioned that he might like to see a gender counsellor, because he was feeling a bit confused about some stuff, "Alright, that's fine"... And then it was maybe a few-a couple of weeks, I guess, he would sort of, you know, start throwing around words like genderqueer, and stuff like that you know, I was sort of trying to prompt him into saying "So you know what, what gender do you identify with? What pronouns do you want me to use when I'm talking to you?" And he was really scared, clearly "I don't know, I don't know". Just one day in the car he was like "I know what I am". "Alright tell me" "Oh yeah, alright, I'm a trans man", "Okay, that's great. I'm so happy that you finally, said it"

¹ Please note that ellipses represent omitted words that did not add to the illustration of the point being made. Square brackets are used to represent phrases I have added for clarity. Speech marks were used when the participants were speaking as another person or as themselves in a previous situation. Equal signs represent the overlapping of voices.

Not only was private disclosure gradual and shared, all participants reported some form of emotional and cognitive response to their partners' decision to transition. These responses were complex and ranged from grief to confusion and happiness.

Often, the trans partners' struggle with their gender identity sparked confusion in the participants. For example, prior to the disclosure of their partners' trans identities, Alice who was in a relationship with a woman who transitioned into a man and Sonja who was in a relationship with a gender neutral person who was transitioning to a masculine identity, both felt confused by their partners' behaviours and discomfort surrounding sexual intimacy. Initially they sensed that "something was wrong" but could not determine what the problem was and both felt confused because the sexual intimacy they had with their partners did not fit with previous experiences with other people and understandings of sexual intimacy between partners in same gender couples. Alice comments illustrated her confusion:

Alice: I think in our, in our relationship, some of, part of me already knew that he wasn't comfortable in his own... For me it was just like "What's going on?"
You know.

Interviewer: Yeah

Alice: "Do you not like me? What am I doing wrong?" because the experience was not one that I had shared with my previous partners.

This confusing sexual behaviour may have stemmed from body dysphoria and gendered sexual behaviour in the participants' trans partners. Previous research has suggested that gender identity and sexual behaviours are closely tied together, where sex is one avenue for trans people, even before coming out, to try out their preferred gender identities by performing sex acts in ways that align to gendered sexual scripts (Schleifer, 2006; Schrock, 2006; Ward, 2010). Alice's and Sonja's partners may have perceived themselves as men rather than gay/lesbian women during sex. Moreover, the trans partners' sexual practices may have become traditionally gendered and because their perceived gender identity did not match with expected sexual behaviours, it could have added to the participants' confusion. Additionally, feeling uncomfortable in one's body is common amongst trans people (Brown, 2010; Pfeffer, 2008). This discomfort may have spilled over to sexual intimacy, in which they were hesitant to share their bodies with their partners (Brown, 2010; Pfeffer, 2008). The participants' partners may have experienced body dysphoria and their reluctance in sharing their bodies seemed to have been interpreted as being disinterested in having sex, which contributed to the participants' confusion.

Some felt a sense of sadness and grief at the realisation that their partners wanted to change their gender. These participants strongly identified as lesbian or gay women and were not attracted to men. They were extremely distressed by the idea of their partners becoming men and changing their bodies to appear more masculine. To them, the thought of their partners transitioning was experienced as loss. This is reflective of the feelings of cis women partners in previous studies who also grieved for the loss of their partners as the men and women they once were (Aramburu Alegría, 2008, 2010; Bischof et al., 2011; L. M. Chase, 2011; Nyamora, 2004). As the participants' attractions were for women, their partners' physical transition may have been seen as having potential to lose physical attraction to their partners. Transition also led to changes in behaviour and personality in their partners. For example, Lisa had experienced her partner as a different person, and felt that she had lost her girlfriend rather than gaining a new boyfriend. These changes might have signalled the end of their relationships as they knew them.

Lisa: ...I was so gutted [laughs], even though I could've maybe seen it coming with the whole genderqueer exploration. Um, and I didn't let on, but I was just like so upset about that. "I just got this awesome girlfriend"...

One participant felt conflicted towards her partner's plans to transition. She was saddened by the changes that her partner wanted, but felt that she should not be upset by their plans as she knew that these changes would bring her partner joy.

Sonja: I guess the way I justified that sadness to myself was just thinking that I liked all of them, you know, including all parts of their body and stuff

Interviewer: = Yeah.

Sonja: That, you know, even though I knew sort of logically that it, it was making them unhappy the way that they looked now, that like I would still feel a bit of grief, for them, for, um, them removing a part of themselves, that it would never come back again.

Feeling conflicted was reported by other cis partners. L. M. Chase (2011) and Nyamora (2004) found that cis partners had conflicting feelings towards their partners' transition. In both studies cis partners felt guilty about feeling sadness towards their partners' transition because they realised that their partners felt miserable in their pre-transitioned bodies and knew that their transition will bring them happiness.

Conversely, Amanda and Emily felt happiness and excitement for their partners' plans to transition. For example, Emily attributed her partner's happiness to his transition and shared in his newfound joy.

Emily: I was so excited for him, I just um, I couldn't wait for him to tell everyone

Interviewer: =Yeah.

Emily: so he could start fully on the journey, yeah. I could already see just how happy it, it made him, yeah.

Emily's excitement partially comes from the notion that her partner will become more comfortable with his body thus more confident and happier. Excitement for their partners' transition was reported by other cis partners. Pfeffer (2008) found that cis partners looked forward to their partners having GRS so that their gender identity and bodily presentation could align. Sharing in the joy of their partners' transformations was expressed by other cis partners (Bischof et al., 2011; Joslin-Roher & Wheeler, 2009) - cis partners found pleasure in watching their partners being able to grow into their authentic selves and encouraged them to do so. Additionally, Nyamora (2004) noted those who were more flexible in their sexual identities were more likely to have positive experiences of transition. Emily mentioned that gender was irrelevant to her attractions to other people and Amanda mentioned a history of sexual experimentation with women. However, it was not clear why Amanda was excited and happy for her partner's transition. Initially, Amanda was uncertain about her partner's crossdressing and it evoked feelings of anger. However, after reading about transgenderism, she realised that her partner was trans and that crossdressing was a part of the process of transitioning. It was almost as if knowing this made her feel at ease and was able to feel more comfortable with her partner's trans identity.

Some participants noted that their partners changed behaviour and appearance and attributed these changes to their transition. These changes evoked negative feelings in some. Dean found that his partner became more self-centred as she transitioned and felt that she did not care for him, causing him to feel hurt. Amanda found herself angry with her partner's crossdressing but as it coincided with her partner's manic episodes, she could not determine whether it was her partner's mania or crossdressing that caused her anger. Reflective of Dean's experiences, Gurvich (1991) and Bischof et al. (2011) found that many of the cis partners perceived their partners to be indifferent to their feelings and needs, and complained about how self-centred and selfish their partners had become

in relation to their transsexual activities and to other parts of the relationship. It seemed that for Dean, his partner was insensitive or indifferent to his emotions by acting on their own desires. Similar to Amanda's experience, previous research has also found that some cis partners respond with anger to their partners' transition and disclosure of their trans identity (Bischof et al., 2011; Gurvich, 1991; Nyamora, 2004). Some cis partners cited that their anger was due having a lack of control over their lives and feeling betrayed by their partners (Gurvich, 1991).

Half of the participants were also irritated by their partners' adherence to stereotypically gendered behaviour. For example, Sonja's partner took on the role of the man in the relationship by paying for meals. She also felt that her partner denied her experiences of sexism and attributed this behaviour to their newfound masculinity. Whereas Lisa felt that her partner's transition caused him to behave like an adolescent boy.

Lisa: ...when he started taking testosterone, he just became a total pain in my arse.

Like

Interviewer: = Yeah.

Lisa: he was so, impulsive

Interviewer: = Yeah.

Lisa: angry, irritable

Interviewer: = Yeah.

Lisa: he was like a little boy, like he, like you know...

Stereotypically gendered behaviour in trans people has been commonly reported by their cis partners and trans people themselves. Aramburu Alegría and Ballard-Reisch (2013) reported that trans partners went through a phase of exploration and experimentation with their gender identity, during which gender expression was exaggerated and stereotyped. In Brown's (2007) study, a cis partner noted that her trans partner felt pressure from others to behave in stereotypically masculine ways in order to be recognised as a man. Ward (2010) found that trans men enhance their masculinity by actively behaving and appearing in ways that they did not associate with femininity or women. Dozier (2005) found in their study of trans men, that when gender identity is perceived as ambiguous, behaviours became highly gendered to counter uncertainty. Most participants' partners were in the early stages of their transition and may have been ambiguous in appearance and consequently relied on behaviours or gender performance (Butler, 1990, 1999) to be recognised as their preferred gender. According to Butler (1990, 1999), gender is a set of stylisation of the body, gestures and behaviours. The participants' trans partners changed the way they

behaved, dressed, styled their hair et cetera, in order to adhere to social understandings of masculinity, thus supporting the idea of gender performativity.

Not all changes associated with transition were responded to in a negative way. Lisa initially felt unsafe when she was in public with her partner as he was not being recognised by others as male. But as her partner transitioned in appearance, he was perceived as male and she felt relieved by this because it meant that her and her partner were safe from transphobic fuelled harassment.

- Lisa: and we were read as heterosexual
 Interviewer: = Yeah.
 Lisa: which amused me more than anything usually
 Interviewer: = Yeah.
 Lisa: it was a relief, it meant that [ex-partner] wasn't being misgendered.

This feeling of being safe was common amongst lesbian or gay identifying cis women partners as their partners became recognised as men. Although these women did not like to pass as straight, they felt safe because it meant that they were no longer subject to homophobic reactions (Brown, 2009; Pfeffer, 2009; 2014).

Some further elements of transition were surprising to participants. Lisa reported that she did not expect her partner to change so dramatically psychologically and physically – her partner was a different person, with different interests and different ways of communicating with her.

- Lisa: ...like I could smell the testosterone
 Interviewer: = Yeah.
 Lisa: I didn't expect that, I didn't even think about that
 Interviewer: = Yeah.
 Lisa: and I didn't expect him to, I mean, like he got so hairy, and he, his body totally changed shape. Yeah, his genitals changed, everything changed apart from maybe his eyes were the same, and his voice changed
 Interviewer: = Yeah
 Lisa: everything yeah and suddenly he was real bulky and muscly, and he could run way faster than me cos we went running together [laughs]
 Interviewer: = Yeah.
 Lisa: [inaudible] and he had different interests, and he, he had a different attention span, it was like having someone who is totally on your wavelength and then they just turned into a teenage boy, who's apparently your partner, yeah. Ah, I didn't expect that, um, that he'd feel like a different person to me.

Sonja was also surprised by the implications of her partner's trans identity. Even though her partner began to identify more with being male she did not expect that they wanted to live as a man and

make plans to have GRS and HRT. She also expected her partner to draw on their past experiences as a woman when relating to her, but this did not occur.

Sonja: I definitely didn't expect at the start when they sort of talked about maybe, you know, to living more as a guy. I didn't expect them to start talking about making any kind of like, I guess physical transitions, I don't know what you would call them, like

Interviewer: = Yeah.

Sonja: actual physical changes to themselves

Interviewer: = Yeah, their body?

Sonja: Yeah, like the most I thought would happen would be a haircut...

Similarly, cis partners in other studies also felt surprised in response to their partners' transition (Aramburu Alegría, 2008; Bischof et al., 2011; Gurvich, 1991). The surprises experienced by the participants suggested that they lacked understanding of trans identities and transition. However, it is expected that some participants might be surprised or lacked understanding of trans identities and transition. These participants may have had little or no exposure to trans identities and transition prior to meeting their partners because trans people make up a small minority of the population (Clark et al., 2013; Olyslager & Conway, 2007) and their chances of coming across others trans people may have been slim.

Half of the participants had questions around their partners' trans identity. Alice's partner was uncertain about his trans identity, and unsurprisingly, Alice was initially unconvinced that her partner was transgender and questioned his gender identity.

Alice: ...he would go back into denial and say "Oh you know, it was just, it was just a thought", "I you know, when I said I wanted to be a boy last week, I didn't really mean it". So he would go in and out of denial, which made me question the legitimacy of his,

Interviewer: = Yeah

Alice: of his experience...

When Amanda's partner came out as a "crossdresser" she wondered how far it would go and what it would mean for the relationship. Sonja questioned whether her partner's identification with the male gender would make a difference to her and her relationship, which seemed to suggest that she lacked understanding of the implications of having a transgender partner.

Sonja: I was kind of like "Oh well I mean, you know, or do you identify as gender neutral, like what difference is it going to make to me if you identify as male?"

In previous studies, cis partners of trans women questioned what transsexualism entailed and what it meant for them and their relationships (Aramburu Alegría, 2008; 2010). Similarly, Buxton (2005) found that amongst heterosexual partners who discovered that their partners were homosexual or bisexual also went through a period of wondering what it would mean for the relationship. Previous researchers found that some cis partners thought that their partners' crossdressing was a phase (Bischof et al., 2011), similar to Alice in that she initially was not convinced that her partner was really transgender. However, it could be that she was simply responding to her partner's uncertainty around his gender identity.

Participants tried to make sense of their partners' trans identity and discussed their views of gender transition. Reflections on gender transition and identity were centred around sexuality, well-being, and embodiment. Amanda felt that sex with her partner was different to her sexual experiences with other men, and she implied that it made sense that her partner turned out to be a trans woman. Amanda recalled that her partner would imagine they were a woman during sex with her and she thought that was unusual for a man. Similarly, Alice also felt that the sex they had prior to her partner's disclosure was "awkward" and unlike what she had previously experienced, and now thought that this was due to her partner's struggle with his gender identity. The links that the participants made between their partners' trans identity and behaviours were similar to previous findings with trans people who felt that their partners' difficulties with sex were somehow related to their trans identity. Trans people often have sex in ways that align with sexual scripts for their preferred gender identity (Brown, 2010; Pfeffer, 2008; Schrock & Reid, 2006; Ward, 2010), which may have contributed to the "awkward" or unusual sex they had with their partners.

In contrast, Emily linked her partner's internal struggle with depression with his questioning of his gender. Prior to her partner coming out as trans, her partner was depressed and suicidal. She noticed that since he came out and was able to express his preferred gender identity, he became happier and more confident. Alice felt that her partner did not seem whole in his identity and comfortable with his body. She also drew on his stories of being a tomboy and she felt that these explained his questioning of his gender and desire to transition.

Alice: And, but was more masculine in the way he presented himself even though he identified as female. And also through the relationship, [ex-partner] told

me a lot of, stories about growing up as like a real tomboy, who hated wearing dresses and skirts and, which in retrospect, were kind of like precursors, I guess [laughs]

Interviewer: = Yeah

Alice: to the questioning of gender identity. And so I guess, in a nutshell, [ex-partner] was pretty masculine, but still identified as a female...

These participants made links between their partners' trans identity and behaviours which were mirrored by literature on the experiences of trans people who often feel uncomfortable in their bodies (Brown, 2010; Pfeffer, 2008) and struggle with their gender identities (Schleifer, 2006). Participants felt that their partners' discomfort in their bodies and struggle with identity were somehow associated with their trans identity.

Most of the participants talked about their views on transition, stating that they understood transition and trans identities to be natural and normal. The participants personally knew and loved a trans person and potentially have been exposed to other trans people and gender transition through their contact with LGBTQ communities. This exposure to transgenderism could have contributed to the normalisation and naturalisation of trans identities and gender transition. Through their exposure to trans people and gender transition, they could have perceived trans people as everyday people who happen to have changed their gender identity from the one assigned to them at birth.

Alice: ...whereas for me, I feel like it's a normal human part of life. And some people are trans and some people are cis, you know it's not a big deal as such.

Similarities can be drawn with Beeler and DiProva's (1999) research. They examined the experiences of family members of people who recently came out to them as gay or lesbian. Since their family members' disclosure of their gay or lesbian identity, participants perceived homosexuality as increasingly normal. Homosexuality was normalised through exposure of homosexuality and integrating their family members' needs relating to their homosexuality into everyday life. For example, certain places were avoided if they were known to be homophobic. Likewise, the participants in the current study also became exposed to trans identities and gender transitions. For example, they were also involved in their partners' transition, adjusting their lives to accommodate for their partners' transition (e.g. changing pronouns, discussing gender identity,

and finding counsellors) so much that it could have normalised transition and trans identities for them.

Two participants saw transition as a source of instability in a relationship but no more disruptive than other problems in relationships between cis people or other major life events that occur within cis couples. These participants talked in ways that normalised transition. Alice, compared gender transition to having an identity crisis and felt that it added the same kind of stress on a relationship as one partner dealing with mental illness. Whereas Dean felt HRT made his partner even more emotionally unstable, thus compounding relationship issues, but also thought that the problems in his relationship could have been occurred in relationships between cis people.

Dean: I think, I think if I was in a relationship with anyone at all, regardless of them transitioning or not, regardless of them being cis or not.

Interviewer: = Yep

Dean: I think that the same kind of issues could have happened

Interviewer: = Yeah.

Dean: Maybe not to the same extent, you know.

Interviewer: Yep.

Dean: Not necessarily the huge roller coaster ride this was, in fact it was more like a down roller coaster than anything.

Similarly, Aramburu Alegría (2008) found that some cis partners perceived their relationships with their trans partners as normal with typical problems. Others further normalised their partners' transition by comparing gender transition to more common disruptions such as alcoholism, moving, divorce, or life-threatening illness (Aramburu Alegría, 2008).

One participant attributed her partner's depression to his body dysphoria and saw gender transition as a cure to her partner's depression.

Emily: "You need to be a BOY to be healthy. Do it."

This participant noted that early in her partner's non-medical transition he felt less depressed and more confident in himself. She has attributed these improvements in mental health to being able to express his masculine identity. Interestingly, studies (Bodlund & Kullgren, 1996; Lawrence, 2003) have shown that most trans people who went through GRS felt that their quality of life improved. Furthermore, Davis and Meier (2014) found that nearly half of the trans men who took part in their study and were on HRT, reported that they felt less depressed since taking testosterone. These previous studies suggest that gender transition can have a positive effect on wellbeing in

trans people. As suggested by Dozier (2005), these improvements in wellbeing could be due to having bodies that matched with socially constructed ideas of what their gender should look like, thus allowing them to be recognised as a member of the gender that they identified with.

Public disclosure

This subtheme describes the process of public disclosure of the trans partners' gender identity, including the nature of the disclosure, important issues surrounding disclosure as well as the participants' interpretations and feelings towards the responses of others to their partners' trans identity and desire to transition.

Like the process of private disclosure, public disclosure occurred as a shared and gradual process with most participants being involved in their partners' disclosure of their trans identity to people outside of the relationship. Aramburu Alegría (2008) also found that for some of the cis-trans couples, disclosure to people outside of the relationship occurred as a gradual and joint process. The degree of involvement of this disclosure varied between participants in the current study. Some participants provided their partners with encouragement and advice on coming out to family members. For other participants, they discussed when, how, and who they could disclose their partner's trans identity with their partner before telling others. Likewise, Beeler and DiProva (1999) examined the experiences of family members of gay or lesbian people. They found that family members also go through their own lengthy coming out process which consisted of deciding when and who to disclose that they have a gay or lesbian family member.

Some participants expressed concern around how others would react to the partners' trans identity and their perceived sexual identity. Both Amanda and Emily were anxious about their workmates and communities learning about their partners' trans identity. Both perceived their workmates and communities as conservative and were therefore afraid that they might react negatively. This caused one participant to delay their disclosure to their work mates.

Amanda: My work, I found that quite hard. I find it quite hard to tell people and my work is very conservative and took me months to actually tell someone about it. I told the people I was sort of closest to first and then we had a function, about nearly a year after I started when partners could come. I was, I had a huge amount of anxiety around that because I didn't want to make a

big announcement, or sort of go around warning people, or anything like that, I just

Interviewer: = Yeah.

Amanda: yeah, I was just, I felt quite anxious going into that and, so we just decided to just turn up, and people could think whatever.

Both Bischof et al. (2011) and Aramburu Alegría (2008) found that some cis women partners of trans women were worried about the reactions of others and were consequently careful about who they disclosed their partners' identity to. One participant in the current study also avoided using female pronouns when referring to her partner around strangers as she was concerned that they would think she was lesbian. Similarly, Aramburu Alegría (2008) also found that several cis women partners of trans women in their study were cautious about using female pronouns in reference to their partners in public because it raised questions about their relationship and sexual identity.

Handling disclosure in a considered way was important due to the potential for the privacy and safety of the trans partners to be put at risk. Sonja considered her partner's need for privacy around their gender identity by not outing them to their mutual friends before her partner was ready. Alice was also very careful about disclosing her partner's trans identity in order to counter transphobic responses. Her disclosure of his identity to others required his consent and the trust of her friends where she did not ask for his consent.

Alice: And he doesn't want me outing him to other people, understandably, you know. There's issues of safety, and there's issues of trust, and other things... There's been two people I have told, without [ex-partner's] consent and they are close and dear friends and they would never do, you know, they-they will keep that information to themselves and I trust that.

The experience of transphobia is very real for trans people (Grant et al., 2011; Human Rights Commission, 2008) and the fear of transphobic reactions towards trans partners has also been found amongst cis partners of trans people in a previous study (Brown, 2007). Brown (2007) suggested that because people are becoming more aware of the existence of transphobia, it creates an environment of fear. This fear of transphobia could explain why some participants were slow to disclose their status as a trans-cis couple to outsiders and why trans partners wanted to keep their trans identity hidden from others.

Although there had been significant concerns about public disclosures all participants felt they had some level of support and acceptance from friends, family, and work colleagues. For example:

Emily: ... everyone openly has, has been really really cool.

Interviewer: Yeah.

Emily: So yeah, all my really good friends and [partner's] really good friends totally accepting, they've all found it really exciting new as well.

Amanda and Lisa found that the children in their lives easily accepted their partners' trans identity.

Lisa: Telling my little brothers and sisters was kind of interesting, but

Interviewer: = Yeah.

Lisa: they just awesome. I mean they were so young

Interviewer: = Yeah.

Lisa: that it was just like "Okay" [laughs]. So they've just grown up with that understanding of trans people...

Bischof et al. (2011) also found that children were more accepting and supportive than other family members.

There was also a sense of relief for some when the participants and their partners' came out to the public as a cis-trans couple. Like the participants in the current study, Aramburu Alegría (2008) found that couples felt stressed by the burden of keeping their identity as a cis-trans couple a secret. However, once this was disclosed, they felt relieved that they were no longer carrying the secret of their partners' trans identity. For example, Emily described her relief when her partner publicly came out as trans:

Emily: So glad that, that people knew because for two weeks there was so much anxiety on my part so "Oh my God I feel like I'm keeping this huge secret from everyone I'm lying by omission". I'm pretty much an open book, so.

However, some participants were upset at the lack of support and acceptance from friends and family. Some participants also felt that people outside their relationship did not understand and were disrespectful of their partners' trans identities. Alice and Lisa found that friends did not use their partners' preferred pronouns and name. They interpreted this as disrespectful towards their partners' trans identity and uneducated about trans issues, which left them feeling angry and upset.

Alice: I refer to [ex-partner] as he, but they still refer to [ex-partner] as a woman, or use female pronouns, which, which I find really annoying and frustrating because there's been so many times I've told them about the transition...

Similar to these findings, Aramburu Alegría (2008, 2010) and Bischof et al. (2011) found that cis partners experienced mixed levels of support from family members. Some family members accepted the news quickly and provided support, while some took time to accept it, and some did support or accept it all. It is possible that this non-acceptance of the participant's partners could be due to friends and family holding transphobic beliefs. Research has shown that trans people often experience stigma in various forms due to their trans status, including having their identity disclosed without their permission (Human Rights Commission, 2008), being verbally harassed (Bockting, Miner, Swinburne Romine, Hamilton, & Coleman, 2013), having needs not met by health professionals (Kidd, Veltman, Gately, Chan, & Cohen, 2011), and experiencing emotional abuse, physical threats, and job loss (Budge, Tebbe, & Howard, 2010).

Support

In this section I discuss the superordinate theme of support, which consists of three subthemes. These three subthemes are: “Barriers to Getting Adequate Support”; “Helpful Support and Helping Oneself”; and “Being Supportive”. Each subtheme will be discussed in turn.

Barriers to getting adequate support

Participants described the various barriers to getting adequate support, which included being unable to talk freely about their experiences as a partner of a trans person; inadequate support systems for partners of trans people; lack of resources; lack of understanding from friends and family; and a loss of social support.

Participants described the loss of support and exclusion that occurred when they and their partners' came out. Amanda reported withdrawal of financial and emotional support from her parents and partner's parents.

Amanda: ...it still felt like I didn't have any support there and they've both, they've, both sets of parents have come a long way. The mums are both on board [laughs].

Interviewer: = Yeah.

Amanda: but the dads are a bit more, they just, prefer to ignore it, really, ignore the whole thing, not talk about it.

Lisa felt that she was no longer welcome to participate in some lesbian activities and felt unsupported by her community.

Lisa: ...like suddenly we couldn't go, we couldn't do some of the lesbian stuff we used to do

Interviewer: = Yeah.

Lisa: and that was kind of upsetting, had a feeling that our supports were being just cut

Consistent with the current study, Aramburu Alegría (2010) and Bischof et al. (2011), found that cis partners who disclosed their partners' trans identity resulted in the loss of support and rejection from friends and family. Additionally, Joslin-Roher and Wheeler (2009), Nyamora (2004), and Pfeffer (2014) found that cis women partners of trans men lost support from lesbian communities as they became opposite gender couples.

Some participants felt that the support they received was inadequate. Half of the participants felt that there was no support specifically for partners of trans people. For example, Lisa was able to find support groups for trans people but she found that these groups did not cater to her support needs.

Lisa: I didn't really have anywhere to go as a partner...

Additionally, three of the participants found that the support they received from their friends and family was lacking as they did not understand gender transition and trans identities.

Sonja: I find it, continually really isolating because so many people, if I talk about any of the challenges that I find with going out with a non-cisgender person, their, like so many people just kind of, think of it as I was going out with someone who's just got like heaps of unresolved mental health issues or something...

Furthermore, half of the participants also found that their family and friends supported them personally but not their relationship with their trans partners.

Amanda: It kind of, I felt like, there wasn't really any support there for me or my decisions. My dad was like "I can't understand why you're still together" and you know, that was just, that was really upsetting.

Cis partners from previous studies also felt that good support was difficult to find. Some cis partners reported a lack of support systems for partners and felt that support specifically for partners of trans people was needed (Nyamora, 2004). Similarly, Gurvich (1991) found that some

cis partners talked to their families about their experiences but were often misunderstood and felt unsupported. Other cis partners stressed that having others understand their specific experience was paramount to their emotional needs (Wilkinson & Gomez, 2004).

Reaching out to people outside of the relationship for help proved to be difficult for some participants. Alice, Amanda, and Sonja found that could not talk freely about their partner's transition as they were trying to preserve their partners' privacy, which seemed to hinder their ability to get support from others. For example:

Alice: I have struggled to, and try and ascertain what is correct, what is the proper etiquette so to speak, um, surrounding talking to my friends about [ex-partner], um, because he is very specific about the people he chooses to tell... but, so it's almost as if I am stuck, because every time I try talk about [ex-partner], almost have to text him and ask "Can I tell this person about your transition or not?"

In a similar vein, one participant found it hard to talk about her problems related to the transition because she feared that her friends and family would not be supportive of her partner's transition.

Lisa: I think that sometimes it meant that I didn't talk them about things as much because I wanted to them to support us

Interviewer: = Yeah.

Lisa: and so telling them some of the hard stuff that was happening, yeah, didn't, wasn't useful...

Similarly, Joslin-Roher and Wheeler (2009) found that one cis partner in their study was reluctant to discuss the challenges of her relationship with her trans partner with others, as she feared they would not be understanding of transgender issues and attribute relationship problems to her partner's trans identity. Alice also felt that she could not talk to her parents about her partner's transition because she felt they would not understand or accept the idea of trans identities.

Some participants felt that suitable resources on trans identities and gender transition did not exist. Sonja felt she needed resources on intimacy with trans people and managing transition related changes that occur in trans people, but was unable to find suitable resources.

Sonja: ...no one talks about, like, um, I don't know, I guess it's kind of a taboo subject but no one talks about things like sex being different with a trans person and like you know respecting people's boundaries and stuff, and I just wish that was discussed more openly... like I guess I would like to how people deal with that and like, yeah, yeah what their experiences are and I

don't know. And like yeah how they, deal with partners and kind of like slightly misogynist things and things like that.

Lisa also found that there were no resources on the experiences of cis partners experiencing their partners' transitions.

Lisa: ...because it's a special experience, and it's good for you to find a way to process it because there are the narratives in popular media and there are not support page that there are for other things

Interviewer: = Yeah.

Lisa: there's not so you need to find your own way with it...

Bischof et al. (2011) and Nyamora (2004) also found that cis partners did not have access to good resources regarding gender transition and related issues.

Helpful support and helping oneself

This subtheme involves the advice that helped participants through their partners' transition and advice that they thought would be helpful to others in a similar situation and helping oneself. Some participants stressed the importance of understanding their partners' gender transition. Sonja and Alice suggested that others in a similar situation should stay informed with their partners' transition in order to understand what is happening with them, to lessen any confusion and misconceptions. Alice stressed the importance of learning about how her partner was experiencing his transition. Sonja provided similar advice, she suggested finding out what is going on with her partner in terms of their transition and their identity to avoid being upset and confused.

Sonja: I guess like I find it helpful to talk to [partner] a lot about their gender and how they're feeling about it at the time... so just like asking lots of questions and I think not being afraid to like ask questions that, about their gender and how they feel because I was afraid at the beginning to talk about it in case I like upset them or something, but I kind of realised that I got more upset by not knowing, so.

Some found that not being alone in their experiences helped them manage the challenges of their partners' transition. Alice found reading about the experiences of others helped her through her partner's transition. Similarly, Lisa contacted other partners and trans people, which she found helpful as they understood what she was going through.

Lisa: I had a couple of friends who were with trans guys, so I met up with them, wrote to them on occasion, and that made a lot of difference for me having people who just got what you're going through...

Sonja also thought it would be helpful to talk to partners of trans people or to people who understood and supported her decisions. Emily suggested surrounding oneself with positive people. Amanda and Lisa found talking about their experiences helped them through their partners' transitions.

Most participants also advised that it would be helpful for cis partners to be kind to themselves during their partners' transitions.

Alice: ...one of the main things, would be for me to advise someone else would be to allow yourself space to make mistakes.

Lisa: Whether you want to stay with someone or not, either way your feelings are important, they're important and that if you don't process them, that impacts your relationship...

Participants' advice was similar to the strategies that helped other cis partners manage the challenges of their partners' gender transition. Cis partners found reading about transgenderism, attending online and local support groups and transgender conferences, meeting with other partners of trans people, and being around supportive people to be useful strategies for managing the challenges of their partners' transition (Bischof et al., 2011; Gurvich, 1991; Joslin-Roher & Wheeler, 2009). Participants in Joslin-Roher and Wheeler's (2009) study suggested that being kind to oneself and sharing experiences with other partners of trans men was also helpful.

Being supportive

In this subtheme, I discuss the challenges participants encountered when providing support to their trans partners as well as their advice to other cis partners of transitioning people. Two participants described the challenge of providing emotional support to their transitioning partners. Alice had a painful and problematic relationship with her partner but provided emotional support to her partner even after they separated. Lisa illustrated the struggle of being her partner's main supporter. Lisa's partner experienced poor mental health, was harassed and had little support. As a result, Lisa felt that she needed to be his sole source of support and took on the enormous task of providing that emotional support and assistance to someone who is not only depressed and suicidal, but is also making a significant change in their life. Lisa focused on her partner's needs rather than her own

emotional needs and struggled immensely while providing this support to him. During this time, Lisa took on his responsibilities and dealt with others on his behalf so he did not need to endure being misgendered and have his gender identity invalidated.

Lisa: ...and I shut down my feelings and didn't deal with them, because I thought it would be better for him because he was one who, urgent, you know

Interviewer: = Yeah

Lisa: situation, he was the one who didn't have anyone, it felt at the time

Interviewer: = Yeah.

Lisa: he have anyone who understood him or supported him... So it was like, I had to, I felt like I had to perform that support.

Reflective of the participants' experiences in the current study, previous researchers reported that many cis partners felt they had to put their partners' needs before their own during the transition (Gurvich, 1991; Nyamora, 2004; Pfeffer, 2010). Similarly, Joslin-Roher and Wheeler (2009) found that many cis partners felt responsible for their partners' emotional wellbeing during their transition and took on the challenging task of supporting their partners during their transition. Likewise, in Pfeffer's (2010) study, many cis women partners felt stressed and exhausted as they provided emotional support to their partners and helped them through depression and suicidal ideation. Pfeffer (2010) also found that the women in her study generally emotionally laboured for their trans men partners in ways that revealed stereotypically gendered roles. The women in Pfeffer's (2010) study took on additional emotional labour as their partners transitioned and described their trans male partners' behavioural patterns in ways that reflected similarities in cis men (DeVault, 1991). This suggests that gender identity is socially located rather than biologically driven (West & Zimmerman, 1987) and is supportive of Butler's (1990, 1999) notion of gender performativity. The emotional support that the participants gave to their partners may have been part of the process of performing gender.

All participants showed their support of their partners' gender identity by changing the language they used when referring to their partners. To acknowledge their partners' gender identity, all participants used gender appropriate pronouns when talking about their partners. For example:

Lisa: ...so I started using boyfriend and he.

Additionally, some participants went one step further and renamed their partner's body parts to more gender appropriate terms.

Sonja: ...they told me that they just didn't identify with their chest the way it was...

Changes to language use was not only used to refer to their partners in the current context, but also for the past when their partners were identifying with their birth assigned gender. Half of the participants used their partners' preferred pronouns historically, re-writing their partners' gendered history.

Amanda: ...I think that as a teenager, because I think as a teenager she thought she might be gay, because of the crossdressing thing...

Changes in language use is consistent with the needs of trans people as they often report that preferred pronoun use is important for affirming their gender identities (L. M. Chase, 2011; Ward, 2010; Wilkinson & Gomez, 2004). Cis partners in previous studies also changed the way they used language when referring to their trans partners (Aramburu Alegría, 2008, 2010, 2013; Aramburu Alegría & Ballard-Reisch, 2013; Brown, 2007, 2009, 2010; L. M. Chase, 2011; Gurvich, 1991; Nyamora, 2004; Pfeffer, 2008, 2009, 2010, 2014). L. M. Chase (2011) further noted that some cis partners of trans men rewrote their partners' gendered histories by speaking as if their partners had never been female. Ward (2010) referred to this rewriting of gendered pasts as the labour of forgetting. Ward (2010) explained that cis partners can "forget" their partners' previous gender identity by using their preferred pronouns, renaming body parts, and interacting with their trans partners in ways that show that they see them as their identified gender. Ward (2010) suggested that forgetting their trans partners' previous gender is one form of "giving gender" or helping their partners achieve gender validation.

Although gender affirming language use was important for supporting their trans partners, two participants found using their partners' preferred pronouns difficult. Alice was in a relationship with her partner for two years before he came out as a man and she was used to using female pronouns. She found it difficult break her habit of using female pronouns.

Alice: Because it's not as simple as your partner saying "Yeah, okay I'm male now", and then you have to like, change your entire like, two, however long you have spent with them calling them one gender, now you have switch to another or a neutral one which I, like I said

Interviewer: = Yep.

Alice: before is even more difficult for me...

L. M. Chase (2011) explained that changing pronoun usage is not an easy psychological task, especially for those in long term relationships because the habit of using differently gendered pronouns needs to be broken. In contrast, for Lisa the difficulty was in deciding on what pronouns to use when talking about her partner before they came out as trans.

One participant stressed the importance of respecting the identities of trans people, advising that cis partners should be conscious of the pronouns that they use when referring to their trans partners.

Alice: To allow yourself to misgender [laughs].

Interviewer: = Yeah.

Alice: And but realise that and reflect on that and understand why you are doing it.

Interviewer: = Yeah.

Alice: And then change your behaviour [laughs]

Additionally, participants advised that cis partners should make efforts to understand their trans partners' experiences and needs. Dean suggested getting to know your partner as an individual rather than relying on stereotypes to guide interactions with them. Alice advised that a good partner should do research to learn and understand what it means to be a trans person and to be in a relationship with a trans person.

Alice: ...I feel like, what a good partner would do in this situation would do, would be to go off and research things on their own and look up information of what it means to be trans, what it means to be a partner of a trans person, what it means to have a relationship together...

The advice the participants provided to other cis partners takes a common sense approach and could apply to other types of relationships. Participants suggest that other cis partners support their trans partners by showing respect and understanding their experiences. Respect was shown to trans partners by using their preferred pronouns, whereas understanding was shown by listening to their experiences and learning about gender transition and trans identities. Unsurprisingly, this advice also mirrors how participants want to be supported and how they personally supported their partners. Participants showed their support in being understanding and listening to their partners and they too wanted their social network to understand their situation.

Changes to the relationship and self

In this superordinate theme, there are four subthemes, which are: “Change to Self: Knowledge, Worldviews, and Personal Qualities”; “Change in Sexual Identity of Self and Relationship”; “Changes to Sexual Intimacy”; and “Changes in the Nature of the Relationship”. Each subtheme will then be discussed in turn.

Change to self: Knowledge, worldviews, and personal qualities

This subtheme covers the changes in knowledge, behaviours, personal qualities, and worldviews that participants experienced as a result of their partners’ transition and processes surrounding transition.

Half of the participants felt that their partners’ transition had had a positive impact on their personal qualities. These participants noted that they felt more empathetic and sensitive towards others’ identities and to diversity.

Emily: I’m well certainly much more sensitive now to people's identities and preferred pronouns...

Others felt that they had become emotionally stronger and more independent.

Amanda: I think it’s made me stronger, emotionally stronger, I feel like, I can handle quite, I feel quite strong, I can handle a lot. And I feel, I feel quite proud of myself, how I’ve dealt with the whole situation.

This is consistent with some of the previous research. Bischof et al. (2011) found that cis partners experienced positive personal growth, while Aramburu Alegría (2008) found that cis partners became more open minded, understanding, confident, empathetic, assertive, and stronger.

The gender transition of their partners created a shift in the way the participants viewed their worlds. For most participants, their partners’ transition was a thought-provoking, belief-challenging, eye-opening experience, which altered their worldviews. Likewise, Bischof et al. (2011) also found that the transition of their partners led cis partners to reflect on and modify their beliefs. For example, some participants in this study felt that their understandings of gender were challenged or had changed.

Sonja: I guess I just don't feel like I can even pin down what gender is really now and what it means to be one gender or the other.

Amanda felt that her partner's transition challenged her beliefs and left her with a positive view of transgender people.

Amanda: ...just also, changing my perspective of transgender people as well because it really easy to sort of [pause]. I mean there's just, those negative feelings or those stereotypes that you have. To break that down is quite empowering, and learning about gender and what it is to be female and. I just found that very very eye opening and empowering... just found it just made me think about things in a way that, I hadn't previously

Interviewer: = Yeah.

Amanda: and I think that's always a good thing

Interviewer: = Yeah.

Amanda: to like challenge your beliefs

Mirroring the experiences of other cis partners (e.g. Brown, 2007), the participants became more sensitive to the gendered nature of their worlds and discrimination experienced by trans people. Alice, Emily and Lisa spoke of their heightened awareness of discrimination faced by non-cis, non-binary gendered people. Alice became more aware of the rigidity of gender binaries and the discrimination from both queer and mainstream worlds that people face if they do not fit neatly into one of the two dominant gender categories. Lisa saw the importance of being cis-gendered in order to keep safe in a world that seems to value cisgenderism. Emily felt that transphobia was so common that it was normalised and expected.

Lisa: I guess I realised how binary the world was

Interviewer: = Yeah.

Lisa: and how safe I was and being so easily recognisably feminine, female, cis, all those things

Most participants gained a better understanding about themselves, transgenderism, and gender as a result of their partners' transition. They felt more educated and gained a better understanding of the experiences of trans people.

Lisa: and I guess I understand more, or at least I understand one person's story more, you know, everyone's different

Interviewer: = Yeah.

Lisa: but what it feels like to feel, not right in yourself

Some participants realised just how little they knew about transition and trans identities but gained a better understanding of trans issues as their partner transitioned.

Sonja: I realised that I just have absolutely no idea, what it is, what it actually feels like to be trans or not to identify with your, with your assigned gender, so.

Similarly, cis partners in other studies became more educated about transgenderism as a result of their partners' transition (Aramburu Alegría, 2008; Nyamora, 2004). As mentioned earlier, some participants talked about researching and discussing transition and trans identities with their partners and so it is unsurprising that participants have gained knowledge and understanding of transition and trans identities.

Change in sexual identity of self and the relationship

Participants talked at length about sexual identity including changes to how they identified themselves and their relationship, and what sexual identity means to them. The participants had varying understandings of what it means to identify with a particular sexual identity thus supporting the notion that sexual identity is socially constructed. Both Alice and Lisa felt that their relationships with their trans men partners could be perceived as heterosexual. However, they felt that neither heterosexual nor lesbian alone were reflective of their identities. Instead, they felt that the term queer was more useful for describing their preferences and relationships. Lisa found the term queer was more encompassing of her circumstances. Alice felt that identifying as queer allowed her freedom to broaden her experiences and experiment with her sexuality, whereas she found that identifying as lesbian to be limiting, as she describes below:

Alice: But, when he said that initially it made me question, what I referred to myself as. If we continued this relationship, does that make me straight? But that's not what I identify with. But that's, if he identifies as a man, and I identify as a woman, then, then we are in a straight, heterosexual relationship and didn't sit right with me [laughs]... now I'm queer, it's fine because I can sleep with a man and it's not a problem.

Interviewer: = Yeah.

Alice: But yeah, so yeah, I guess did experiment on some level. But, yeah. It allowed for an easier, understanding of myself. It allowed me to, experience

Interviewer: = Yeah.

Alice: and work out thinking without, being like, breaking the rules of you know

Interviewer: = Yeah.

Alice: what it means to be this label... if you're a lesbian and you sleep with a man, then you are has-bian, you know [laughs]. Like, and everyone looks at you and frowns upon you, and it's like.

Sonja also reflected on her sexual identity and identified strongly as gay and saw having a relationship with her gender neutral/masculine identified partner as an exception to being gay. She felt physical appearance is more important to her romantic and sexual attractions than gender identity. Sonja saw being gay as based on others' perceptions and as a way of conducting a relationship. Amanda understood her heterosexuality as a feeling, the inability to fall in love and have a relationship with a woman.

Amanda: And, I've never fallen in love with a woman, I've only ever fallen in love with men, and then after [ex-partner] starting taking oestrogen, it sort of confirmed to me that, I do, I'm definitely heterosexual. I couldn't see myself having a relationship with a woman, I mean...

In contrast, Emily took a more simplistic approach and suggested that the sexual orientation of a relationship be based on the gender identities of those in the relationship.

Previous literature also suggested that cis partners construct sexual identity in multiple ways. For example, Pfeffer (2009, 2014) found that some participants felt using queer as an identifier was useful because it is boundless and covers different forms of sexuality, whereas others felt that since queer has multiple meanings, it became meaningless and vague. Some felt that the use of queer as an identifier rendered their bisexuality invisible because of the assumption that queer really meant gay or lesbian. In line with Queer Theory, variation in the meaning of the same sexual identity label between people suggests the socially constructed nature of sexual identity (Dozier, 2005; Jagose, 1996; Rich, 2007; Spargo, 1999).

Half of the participants experienced changes to their personal sexuality. Similarly, previous research suggested that it was common for cis partners of trans people to question and re-define their sexual identity (Aramburu Alegría, 2008, 2010, 2013; Bischof et al., 2011; L. M. Chase, 2011; Gurvich, 1991; Joslin-Roher & Wheeler, 2009; Nyamora, 2004; Pfeffer, 2008, 2009, 2014) as their partners transitioned. For Dean, although he did not change his identity from pansexual, he felt more drawn to men as a result of his partner's transition. Both Alice and Lisa struggled to give themselves and their relationships a sexual identity label. Pfeffer (2009) suggested that such difficulty in redefining sexual identity stems from the idea that existing language and social categories do not adequately accommodate for cis partners paired with trans people. Additionally, Alice's and Lisa's partners' transitions prompted their change in sexual identity. They previously

identified as lesbian and later both opted to use the identifier queer in addition to or instead of lesbian. Alice identified as queer as it encompassed her identity and preferences better than lesbian. For Lisa, she felt that using the label queer helped her and others make sense of her situation as a lesbian woman in a relationship with a trans man.

Lisa: I think I still identified with femme lesbian the whole way through but I started using the word queer part way through because I did start to, to need a way for myself, more for the rest of the world, my peers to be able to explain "Yeah well, I'm into him and he's a trans guy. Yeah, he's a guy and he's my boyfriend." so I guess that word made me feel a sense of gluing, like, it all together so it could make sense. I definitely started using that word where I wasn't using that word before.

Similar to the participants in the current study, it was common for cis partners to use more inclusive terms encompassing labels, such as queer and heteroflexible, to identify their sexuality in ways that better matched their desires and relationships (Aramburu Alegría, 2008, 2013; Brown, 2009; L. M. Chase, 2011; Joslin-Roher & Wheeler, 2009).

Many of the participants redefined the sexual identity of their relationship in ways to accommodate their own sexual identity and their partners' changing gender identity. Sonja initially identified her relationship as gay. As her relationship progressed and she perceived her partner as more male/gender neutral, she saw her relationship more as gay/queer. Similarly, for Lisa the relationship changed from butch-femme lesbian to queer, as her partner transitioned into a man.

Lisa: ...I guess we did think of ourselves as queer as a queer couple. I think we still fit with butch-femme, we still liked that
 Interviewer: = Yeah.
 Lisa: but it was more of that's how we started thing... Yeah I guess we were more of a queer couple, but we'd always, I'd say "I'm still lesbian"

Emily on the other hand had previously identified her relationship as lesbian and then re-identified her relationship as heterosexual when her partner came out as male.

Emily: Well yeah, so we were, we were in a lesbian relationship,
 Interviewer: = Yeah
 Emily: I guess you could call it,
 Interviewer: = Yeah.
 Emily: two girls and now, yes, we are now in a heterosexual relationship

The changes in sexual identity labels used could be reflective of the contextual nature of sexual identity and their need to validate their partners' preferred gender identities. Both Pfeffer (2014)

and Brown (2007) argued that sexual identity is contextual. Pfeffer (2014) suggested that sexual identity is “understood as largely situational and context/partner/community-dependent, rather than individual, inherent or fixed and immutable” (p.22). Pfeffer (2014) found that cis partners used different sexual identity labels depending on the gender of their partner. For example, a cis woman identifying the relationship as lesbian when in a relationship with another woman, and identifying the relationship as straight when dating a man. Additionally, Brown (2007) found that cis partners would return to their original sexual identity if they separated from their trans partner. Because most of the participants in this study did not change their personal sexual identity significantly but instead changed the labels for their relationships, it does suggest that they understood sexual identity to be contextual. Moreover, it has been suggested that sexual identity labels used by cis partners function to validate their partners’ gender identity (Pfeffer, 2009). Some cis women partners of trans men in Pfeffer’s (2009) study carefully considered their partners’ need to be accepted as their preferred gender identity when re-defining their sexual identity. For example, one participant used the term bisexual to acknowledge her partner’s male identity. Thus it seems that changes the participants made to sexual identity labels were used to recognise the gender identities of their partners and to reflect their circumstances.

Changes to sexual intimacy

In this subtheme participants described how sexual intimacy with their trans partners changed throughout their transition. For some, the way they interacted with their partners’ bodies changed. For example, Sonja’s partner’s chest became off limits due to their apparent body dysphoria.

Sonja: ...it’s not really like their chest is like a thing that I, you know, is a part of our relationship...

Brown (2010) and Pfeffer (2008) found that some participants were unable to access their partners’ bodies during sex, with some body parts being off limits. Nyamora (2004) and Pfeffer (2008) noted that it seemed that touch served as a reminder to trans partners that their bodies do not align with dominant understandings of gendered bodies, which may have been the case for Sonja’s partner.

Others found that sex became stereotypically gendered after their partners came out as trans. Alice felt that sex was about expressing her partner’s male gender identity rather than providing pleasure.

Alice: ... the sexual elements of the relationship changed a lot.

Interviewer: = Yep.

Alice: Ah the power play.

Interviewer: = Yep.

Alice: Of like being a male, therefore being dominating, therefore being the top. [Pause] and I didn't like that all. It wasn't something that sat right with me. Because it was- it became very much like what it means to have sex like a male with a female in a heterosexual relationship.

Similarly, sex for Amanda and her partner after disclosure changed in ways that allowed her partner to express their femininity. She took on the dominant, more masculine role during sex at her partner's request.

Amanda: But yeah, and then later on when, before hormones but after she, when she was coming to that decision to transition. We were doing quite a bit of role reversal, where, I'd use a strap-on on [ex-partner].

Similar findings have been reported in other studies. Brown (2010), Schrock and Reid (2006), and Ward (2010) suggested that sex is important in affirming gender and sexual identities. Schrock and Reid (2006) found that trans women associated different sex acts and roles with different sexual and gender identities, for example, with stereotypical straight sex, the woman takes on the passive role, with the man initiating sex, whereas with stereotypical gay sex the emphasis is on equality. Ward (2010) further noted that trans men equated femininity with submission and found that trans men were hesitant to take on submissive roles during sex because they would be "the girl". Brown (2010) found that early in transition, sex became increasingly stereotypically gendered (e.g., men penetrating their partners, female partners being passive), with an emphasis on activities used to bolster partners' gender identity. Brown (2010) noted that one participant and her trans partner, incorporated body modifying devices (e.g. chest binders) to their sexual relationship to create a more "embodied" experience. Similarly, Amanda used a strap-on with her partner, allowing her partner to take on a submissive, stereotypically feminine role. Ward (2010) viewed these types of changes to sexual intimacy as a form of gender labour used to give gender to trans partners.

For some, sex ceased to accommodate for their partners' comfort or their changing feelings towards their partner. As Amanda's partner's transition progressed, sex ceased as she no longer found her partner sexually attractive.

Amanda: And then pretty much after [ex-partner] started taking female hormones there wasn't really kind of intimate relationship there anyway, and so it just sort of felt like we were just friends...

Similarly, Aramburu Alegría (2008, 2013) and Bischof et al. (2013) also found that some cis partners were no longer attracted to their partners as their partners transitioned and consequently sex within their relationships ceased.

Sexual intimacy for Emily and her partner also stopped. However she attributed this change to her partner's discomfort in his body and viewed this cessation in sexual activity as temporary. She believed that as her partner transitions and becomes more masculine and comfortable in his body, sexual intimacy will return.

Emily: When he was, yeah, we do have a wee surge in sexual activity when he was exploring his, gender identity and then just

Interviewer: = Yeah.

Emily: after he came out

Interviewer: = Yeah.

Emily: of course, yeah, we were very bonded during that time and he was feeling really confident about himself for the first time, and a long time, so no doubt people get it back. But yes, right, right now, any, any sort of sexy stuff I guess, I kind of want it to be on his terms so he's completely comfortable.

Pfeffer (2008) found that body dysphoria in trans partners often meant they became reluctant to share their bodies and thus discontinued having sex. Cis partners in other studies reported that as their partners' felt more connected with their bodies (usually associated with progression of transition), sexual intimacy increased (Brown, 2010; Nyamora, 2004).

Changes in the nature of the relationship

Gender transition also impacted on the quality and nature of the participants' relationships. Half of the participants associated their partners' transition with problems within their relationships. Dean found that his partner became even more erratic and unstable than she was previously, which he had partially attributed to the testosterone blockers she was taking. As a result the relationship became problematic and unstable.

Dean: I did not expect from my partner really was, her mental state, I guess, would compound that and that it would end up as a sort of love-hate cycle.

Amanda found that her partner's crossdressing caused conflict between her and her partner.

Amanda: ...it did cause quite a bit of conflict within the relationship.

Lisa felt that her partner's inability to communicate effectively with her was a product of his HRT. Because of his inability to match her communication style, they were unable to resolve the problems that they were having, which were frequent at the time.

Lisa: His whole communication just totally changed. Yeah and we just couldn't fight like we used to, which was a real barrier to resolving a lot of our problems that we were having, which were heaps.

Other cis partners in previous research also reported that relationship quality decreased as their partners transitioned. Nyamora (2004) found that many cis partners experienced conflict due to transition related issues. Gurvich (1991) reported that participants felt that their relationships became more problematic because the relationship revolved around their partners' transition.

Half of the participants felt that the transition improved the quality of their relationship. Some participants became closer to and more comfortable with their partners. For Sonja, both her and her partner felt more comfortable and supported in the relationship.

Sonja: ...I'd say it's like, we're both more comfortable now...

Emily found that her relationship became emotionally healthier because her partner was no longer depressed as he could be himself through gender transition.

Emily: ...so he's much happier now.

Interviewer: Yeah.

Emily: And our, yeah, our relationship is a lot better for it.

Lisa felt that her and her partner grew closer as a result of the transition.

Lisa: Our relationship was pretty intensely close and amazing because we were going through it together

Interviewer: = Yep.

Lisa: I also had my own stuff going on so we were going through our own, you know, some big stuff together so we really had such a cool relationship for it

Interviewer: = Yeah.

Lisa: a lot of the time.

Interviewer: Yeah.

Lisa: So yeah without that stuff happening, I don't know that, I mean our relationship couldn't have been that close and that loving and that, intimate and special.

Similar improvements in relationship quality were also reported by cis partners in previous research. Joslin-Roher and Wheeler (2009) found that most cis partners in their study felt more satisfied with their relationships because they were able to work through trans related issues. Gurvich (1991) reported that cis partners that they felt more trusted and intimate with their trans partners. Aramburu Alegría (2008) found that many cis partners felt that their relationships were more authentic and of better quality after disclosure and led to feelings of positivity and less emotional distance. Aramburu Alegría (2010) found that increases in authentic presentation (e.g. through surgery) in trans partners was associated with positive interactions within their relationship with their cis partners.

The nature of the relationship also changed for some participants. Four participants said that their relationships ended. This was common in other trans-cis couples, many of the cis partners in the previous research were no longer in relationships with their trans partners (Brown, 2007, 2009, 2010; Gurvich, 1991; Nyamora, 2004; Pfeffer, 2009, 2010; 2014). Not all of these studies gave reasons for why the relationships terminated, but some cis partners in Nyamora (2004) cited unresolved transition related conflict as a reason for ceasing their relationship. In this study only Amanda explicitly attributed the separation to her partner's transition. Similar to other cis partners' experiences (Aramburu Alegría, 2008; Bischof et al., 2011), Amanda's relationship shifted from a romantic and sexual relationship to a friendship. She identified that sexual intimacy was the missing ingredient for maintaining a happy relationship.

Amanda: ...I didn't expect what effect not having intimacy in a relationship would have

Interviewer: = Yeah.

Amanda: on my feelings towards [ex-partner]. Because I think when it's missing it makes you less tolerant of other issues in the relationship

Interviewer: = Yep.

Amanda: especially when I was having to deal with manic episodes it just made me a lot less tolerant of that because we didn't have that side of our relationship to make it stronger

Interviewer: = Yeah.

Amanda: like make me accept bad behaviour during manic episodes so it just kind of, those manic episodes kind of wore me, worn down my tolerance for being in the relationship.

Other participants expressed some uncertainty around the future of their relationships. Bischof et al. (2011), Gurvich (1991), and Nyamora (2004) also found that some of the cis partners who

remained in relationships were uncertain about whether the relationship would remain intact. Both Lisa and Sonja, who identified strongly as lesbian and gay, doubted the future of their relationships as they were not interested in men.

Sonja: I still find it challenging, that I'm not in a relationship with another girl. And that it's not what I expected and I guess like, making decision to, you know to continue to be in the relationship...

Likewise, Brown (2010) also found that cis partners with more rigid sexual identities had also doubted the future of their relationships with their trans partners which was possibly due to a lack of attraction to their partners.

The findings demonstrated the similarities in experiences across the six participants. Their experiences shared elements such as the joint and gradual process of disclosure; the challenges of giving and receiving support; and the changes to their sense of selves and to the quality and intimacy of their relationships. Although they shared their experiences to a degree, there were also differences and diversity across their accounts. The implications for this research and concluding statements will be described and discussed in the next chapter.

Chapter four: Conclusions, implications, recommendations, reflections and future research

This chapter draws conclusions from the research findings outlined in the previous chapter. It also discusses the implications of these findings for the health sector, cis partners and their families and friends, and for future research. It also reflects on the research processes involved and includes a discussion of limitations and strengths.

Overall, it was found that the participants talked about their experiences of their partners' gender transition in ways that suggested that they were both positively and adversely affected by their partners' transition. For the participants, their partners' transition evoked complex emotions and cognitive responses. Many of the participants experienced their partners' disclosure as trans as a gradual and shared process. Participants felt that they had changed in the way they viewed their worlds and saw themselves. They also felt that their relationships changed in terms of quality, nature, and intimacy. Participants generally felt supported by others but some felt challenged by a lack of resources, understanding, and accepting supporters.

Most of the participants spoke of their partners' transition in ways that suggest that both gender and sexual identities are socially constructed in nature, rather than fixed innate qualities. For example, the trans partners' private and intimate disclosure to the participants illustrated the fluid nature of gender identity. Some participants reported that their partners appeared to have gone through a period of exploring and discovering their gender identities before coming out as their preferred gender identity. Some trans partners also came out in two stages in which they identified themselves somewhere on a gender continuum and then they eventually settled on their preferred gender identity. This suggests gender identity has a degree of fluidity and supports Butler's (1990) notion that gender identity is not a fixed, innate property.

Some participants also talked in ways that suggested that sexual intimacy was an important avenue for gender performance for some trans partners. For these participants they noted that as their partner questioned their gender identity, sex felt confusing as their partners behaved in unexpected ways. It has been found that trans people will often act out their preferred gender during sex (Brown, 2010; Schrock & Reid, 2006; Ward, 2010) and their partners' unexpected behaviour may have been due to their partners behaving in ways that they associated their preferred gender identity

rather than their perceived gender identity. Moreover, sex also changed as partners transitioned. Sexual practices and roles became more traditionally gendered. For example, one participant reported that her trans man partner took on the dominant role during sex, in which he had sex with her in ways that he thought heterosexual men had sex. The increasingly traditional gendered sexual behaviours that some trans partners made as they transitioned support the notion that gender is performed through a set of acts and mannerisms (Butler, 1990, 1999).

Some participants also spoke about their experiences of supporting their partners through their transition in ways that suggest that gender identity is performed. It appeared that for some of the participants and their partners, gender identity was enacted through receiving and providing emotional labour. Some cis women partners took on more emotional labour in their relationships as their partners transitioned into men. These women partners became sole supporters of their partners and took on other forms of emotional labour such as providing advice and dealing with agencies on their partners' behalf. These similar patterns of emotional labour have been found amongst heterosexual cis couples (DeVault, 1991). This shift in emotional labour in the participants' relationships could be another way in which gender is performed to reflect more traditional gender roles (Butler, 1990, 1999).

Furthermore, participants changed the way they used language in order to support their partners by validating their preferred gender identity. Pronouns were changed to reflect their partners' preferred gender identity, body parts were renamed (e.g. breast became chest) and some participants used their partners' preferred names and pronouns retrospectively. According to Ward (2010) these changes in language use is a form of "giving gender". Using gender appropriate language, especially when used retrospectively functions to both affirm their partners' gender and to forget that they were ever assigned a different gender identity (Ward, 2010). This appears to be a form of gender performativity (Butler, 1990, 1999) in which the cis partner plays a crucial part by "forgetting" their partner's assigned gender identity and by validating their preferred gender identity by the language they use.

Most participants reflected on their understandings of sexual identity in ways that suggest that sexual identity is socially constructed. For example, meanings of sexual identity varied between

participants in a number of ways, for some it was a feeling, a personal identity, the way couples interacted and were perceived by others, or based on gender identity of oneself and their partner. Additionally, for most participants, their personal or relationship sexual identity changed as their partner transitioned. These changes were made to make sense of their circumstances and to accommodate for their personal preferences and their partners' gender identity. These variations in understandings of sexual identity between participants and the changes they made to how they labelled their sexual identity support the notion that sexual identity is both socially constructed and fluid (Butler, 1990, 1999; Foucault, 1978).

Most of the cis partners in this study had experiences that shared some of the elements with cis partners in US and Canada based studies. Like the participants in current study, participants in previous studies received mixed levels of support from friends and family and had difficulty obtaining appropriate support (Aramburu Alegría, 2008, 2010; Bischof et al., 2011; Gurvich, 1991; Joslin-Roher and Wheeler, 2009; Nyamora, 2004; Pfeffer, 2014). They also experienced positive changes to their sense of selfhood (Aramburu Alegría, 2008) and changes to their worldviews (Bischof et al., 2011). Some participants in previous studies experienced private disclosure as a gradual process (Aramburu Alegría, 2008; Bischof et al., 2011). Most participants changed their language usage to reflect their partners preferred gender identity (Aramburu Alegría, 2008, 2010, 2013; Aramburu Alegría & Ballard-Reisch, 2013; Brown, 2007, 2009, 2010; L. M. Chase, 2011; Gurvich, 1991; Nyamora, 2004; Pfeffer, 2008, 2009, 2010, 2014). Moreover, sexual intimacy also became more stereotypically gendered for some of these participants (Brown, 2010; Pfeffer, 2008; Ward, 2010). Sexual identity also changed in ways that accommodated for the participants' circumstances (Aramburu Alegría, 2008, 2013; Pfeffer, 2009, 2014). It is interesting that participants from different cultures can share many common elements of experience. It could be that although New Zealand is culturally very different from Canada and the USA, the participants may have been influenced by North American media, which might explain some similarities. Before I began the study I read several North American based studies on partner experiences and this may have influenced what questions I asked the participants, what I paid attention to when I coded the data, and how I interpreted their data, which could also explain some of the similarities.

Where the participants in the current study differed from North American participants was in the shared aspect of learning of their partners' trans identity. Unlike the participants in the current study, those in previous studies did not mention that they were involved helping their partner discover their preferred gender identity or in discussions prompting their partner to disclose their preferred gender identity. Instead of private disclosure being a discrete event, most of the participants in the current study had conversations over a period of time with their partners around issues of gender or their partners' discomfort around sex that led to their partners' disclosure of their trans identity. It may be that the participants in the previous studies had fewer opportunities to speak about their partners' private disclosure. Perhaps these participants were not asked to give the details of how their partners' came out to them, but instead were questioned about how they felt about their partners' trans identity and transition. Perhaps there is cultural difference in how couples interact with and talk to one another. North Americans may be more direct in their communication, whereas it may be more culturally appropriate in New Zealand to talk around a topic.

In multiple studies (L. M. Chase, 2011; Pfeffer, 2009, 2010, 2014; Ward, 2010), cis women partners of trans men intentionally emphasised their femininity. Some trans men in the previous studies, who felt less masculine encouraged their women partners to act and dress in a more feminine manner (Pfeffer, 2008). The participants in this study, unlike those in the North American studies, did not feel that they had to change their appearance to bolster their partners' gender identity. Perhaps trans partners of the participants in the current study felt that their gender identity was independent from their partners. It may also be that North Americans have a more traditional view of gender identity and relationships and were perhaps less comfortable with appearing ambiguous, thus expecting their partners to bolster their gender identity.

Implications and recommendations

This study suggests that experiencing one's partner's transition to another gender is challenging especially when the cis partner has little support and has not been exposed to trans identities and gender transition. But it is important for cis partners to know that they are not alone. Trans partners are not the only ones experiencing changes, these findings suggest that cis partners and their

relationships are likely to change as well. Cis partners can expect that sexual intimacy will change and that their partners' behaviour may become more stereotypically gendered.

There were variable experiences across the participants in terms of support received from friends and family. Some participants found that when they reached out to friends and family that they were personally supported. However, some also felt that their experiences and their partners' transition and trans identity were misunderstood. There was a perception that friends and family responses towards the disclosure of their partners' trans identity and transition was at times unsupportive. Participants also felt that people in their lives did not support their relationships with their trans partners and this lack of support was frustrating and upsetting for some. It was important that friends and family were supportive and understanding because these are who the participants reached out to for help when they had challenges in their lives. Friends and family could show support and understanding to cis partners in a number of ways including: taking time to learn about transition and trans identities either by reading material written by trans people or by their partners (e.g. *Whipping Girl* by Julia Serano); by being respectful by using the trans partners' chosen name and preferred pronouns; by not asking about how they have sex or whether their partners have had GRS; listening to the cis partners; by not making judgements about the trans partner based on their decision to transition; and being aware of and not using transphobic language. By providing this support and understanding, it could give cis partners a feeling that they are not alone and help them manage the challenges of their partners' transition.

A complaint amongst some of the participants was the lack of adequate support specifically for partners of transitioning people. One participant specifically mentioned that she would like to be in contact with other partners of trans people in order to share experiences and to learn about the complexities of the intimate and personal elements of being in a relationship with a trans person. Another participant felt that being in contact with other cis partners and trans people was helpful because they shared similar experiences and understood their needs. This suggests that partners of trans people need more accessible support groups made up of others like them. There are currently very few organisations in New Zealand that focus solely on partner support. Support groups for partners in Wellington could be run with the help of Wellington based support groups for SOFFAs (significant others, friends, family and allies) and trans people such as Tranzform and Evolve.

Partner support groups could be managed and facilitated by volunteers and other partners, and Tranzform and Evolve could help by providing safe spaces for meetings to be held, provide information on transition and how it could affect relationships, and support and training to facilitators of these groups. Additionally, the Ministry of Health could also provide human resources and funding to help set up nationwide support groups. Nationwide support groups are much needed as they are generally located in larger centres in New Zealand and those living in smaller towns and rural locations may miss out on the support they need.

Other participants noted that their partners were unsupported. Participants felt that they had to be their partners sole supporters and often found that providing emotional support was difficult. To alleviate the strain of being the lone provider of emotional support for their partners, trans people could be better supported to live as their preferred gender identity. Support to trans people can be provided in a variety of small but meaningful ways such as: challenging transphobic comments; supporting organisations aimed at helping trans people; supporting policy that helps trans people; and educating others on interacting respectfully with trans people.

Limitations, strengths, reflections, and future research

In this section, I reflect on the research process and the findings. I will discuss some of the limitations of the research such as participant recruitment, time constraints as well as how the findings may have been affected by other factors, and directions for future research. Language used in the recruitment advertisement may have discouraged potential participants from approaching me. As I asked for participants who were or are partnered with trans people, it could be possible that some trans people do not see themselves as transgender. This might also mean that their cis partners do not consider their trans partners to be trans out of respect and acceptance of their trans partners' identity as non-trans and therefore did not respond to the advertisement. There are other reasons why people may have been reluctant to participate. A couple of people expressed some interest in speaking with me initially but appeared to lose interest after I provided them the information sheet. It may have been that found it hard to talk to a stranger about such a personal experience. The process of reliving their experiences as a partner of a transitioning person may have been perceived as emotionally difficult. The people in my study could represent those of an entirely different experience than those who chose not to participate.

Due to time constraints I could only interview a maximum of six people, once each. Qualitative research has also been criticised for its inability to be generalised from a small study sample to a larger population (Koch & Harrington, 1998). However, the aim is not to generalize the findings of this study and apply these to a wider population. The aim is to gain an understanding of how partners or former partners of transitioning trans people experience their partners' gender transition. It is possible that if more participants were included in the study, a wider range of experiences could have been explored, thus broadening my understanding of cis partner experiences. It is also possible that multiple interviews may have contributed to richer accounts by allowing for participants to add information that they forgot in earlier interviews and for building stronger rapport with the participants, making them more willing to share with me.

I also requested that the participants bring material objects to the interviews. The purpose of bringing the objects to the interviews was to stimulate dialogue and build rapport (Collier Jr, 1987; Sheridan & Chamberlain, 2011). However, it was optional for participants to bring material objects and only one participant brought a material object. This participant brought a photo album that contained pictures of her and her trans partner and some of the photos were discussed. It seemed that the photos helped this participant recall some of her memories of her partner's transition and generated more dialogue.

A strength of the study was the use of semi-structured interviews. The open ended questions provide direction to interviews to help answer the study aims. At the same time, open ended questions also allow the participants to answer questions in ways that let them express themselves. This potentially allows for more and interesting data to be produced, thus broadening understandings of cis partner experiences. However, IPA assumes that participants have good grasp of language and are able to express themselves well (Willig, 2008). IPA relies on participants being able to articulate their experiences in a sophisticated, detailed manner (Willig, 2008). Because of this I had to make assumptions about what the participants were trying to say in their accounts, which may have meant that I missed important issues or may have seen something that was not there.

The time that had passed since the participants' partners' transition may have influenced how they spoke about their experiences. For most participants, their partners were in the process of transitioning at the time of the interview and their experiences were fresh. For two participants, it had been two to three years since they were in a relationship with their transitioning partner and they seemed to struggle with recalling some memories of the transition. This may have meant that some important details of their experiences were missed.

IPA itself offered some challenges. When I did the initial coding I continued to see the same codes in each transcript. It is difficult to distinguish whether this was my failure to completely bracket off previous accounts or whether the initial codes were really reflective of the data. I felt that I may have overlooked unique initial codes because I felt my focus was on similarity between accounts. When I interpreted the data I relied on my own personal experiences, using these experiences to help make sense of the participants' accounts. There was potential for my interpretations to be too heavily grounded in my own experiences. I found myself pulling back and thinking "Is this interpretation of their experience, or am I involving myself too much?" I also thought that I could be over-looking the unfamiliar (to my own experiences and to previous findings) as well. Because of this, the findings may have been skewed in ways that reflect more of my experience. However, had I not had a similar experiences to the participants, it would have been more difficult to quickly develop rapport with the participants. Additionally some of the participant comments may have been lost on me and I may have struggled to understand what they were trying to convey.

One element of the research design that could be changed was the recruitment process. Of the six participants, there was only one male participant and one heterosexual participant, five in their twenties and all were of European descent and well educated. As culture, age and gender influences experiences, it might be interesting to explore how a more diverse sample (including more men, older, and ethnically diverse people) experienced the public and private disclosure of their partners' trans identity and how it personally changed their personal qualities, worldviews, and their relationships with their transitioning partner. Exploring intersections of cis partners' gender, ethnicity, or age to how they make sense of their experiences of having a transitioning partner would be of great benefit in future research.

In the current study, most of the participants were living in a large city at the time of the interview. The location of the participants may have also impacted on their experiences. Larger cities may be more welcoming of people who are gender diverse and their partners and provide more support to these people, therefore making their experiences easier. How would location impact on cis partner experiences? Would it be more difficult for cis partners living in small towns and rural locations? There was also one parent in the study, however the current study did not explore in detail of how transition of one's partner impacted parenting or their children. Future research could explore this in greater depth.

Moreover, it is clear that cis partners need support to help them through their partners' transition. Future research could explore what types of support that cis partners need and how this could be provided to them.

Conclusion

This study explored the experiences of cis partners of people transitioning to a different gender through in-depth interviews and IPA. Findings highlighted the way gender transition transformed the cis partners themselves, their relationships with their transitioning partners, and their worldviews; the way they experienced the public and private disclosure of their partners' trans identity; the way they processed their partners' transition both emotionally and cognitively; and cis partners' need for support and understanding from their friends and family. The findings supported the notion that gender and sexual identities are socially constructed in nature and illustrated some of the differences and similarities between the experiences of North American based cis partners and those who reside in New Zealand. This study also highlighted the need to explore the ways support can be provided to partners of transitioning people as well as exploring the experiences of more demographically diverse partners of transitioning people.

Appendices

Appendix A

Recruitment Advertisement



EXPERIENCES OF PARTNERS OF TRANSGENDER PEOPLE

Hi my name is Krystle and I am a student at Massey University, Wellington campus working towards a Master's degree in psychology.

I am interested in the experiences of current and former partners of transgender people as they transition. By transgender, I mean, people who do not identify with the gender they were assigned to at birth. By transition, I mean, *any* changes a person makes to align themselves with their self-identified gender.

In this study, I will interview participants for about an hour, asking them about their experiences of their current or former partner's gender transition.

If you are interested or know someone who could be interested in participating, please email me at krisi.chester@gmail.com, or contact me text me on 027 323 1580.

Are you 18 years or older?

Are you fluent in written and spoken English?

Are you or were you partnered with someone going through a gender transition?

Were you with your partner before they transitioned?

Are you or were you in a committed relationship with your partner?

Are you non transgender?

Appendix B

Information sheet



The experiences of partners of transgender people

Who is conducting this research project?

My name is Krystle Chester. I'm undertaking this research project to fulfill the requirements for completing a Master's of Science degree in Psychology, at Massey University. This project is being supervised by Professor Antonia Lyons and Dr Veronica Hopner at the School of Psychology.

What is this research about?

The aim of this research project is to explore the experiences of current and former partners of transgender people as they transition into their identified gender. I am interested in what experiences partners have and how they understand their experiences.

Who can take part?

I am inviting former and current partners of transgender people to be interviewed about their experiences of their partner's gender transition. To take part, you must be at least 18 years of age, non-transgender and fluent in written and spoken English. You need to have been in a committed relationship with your partner. You need to have been in the relationship prior to and during some part of your partner's transition, but do not need to be in the relationship now. To say thanks for your time and for sharing your personal experiences, you will be given a \$30 Prezzy card.

What will happen in the study?

You will be invited (but not obligated) to bring along material objects such as photos or diaries that are relevant to your experiences to aid discussion. In the audio recorded interview, you will be asked to talk about your experiences of your partner's gender transition. I will start with asking some general questions about you. Then I will ask questions about your relationship with your transgender partner and how your partner's gender transition impacted on you. Interviews will be an average of one hour long and non-alcoholic drinks and snacks will be provided. I will transcribe (type up) the interview into a document.

Before the interviews start, you will be asked to read and to complete a consent form. You will be asked if you would like to receive a summary of the findings. You will be allocated pseudonyms (e.g. a different name) and all other identifying information (e.g. employers, town names, names of friends, etc.) will be omitted or changed in the transcript of the interview. After the interview is transcribed, you will be given a copy of your transcript to read and edit for accuracy, or to delete anything you do not wish to be included. This should take approximately one hour of your time. After this you will be asked to sign a form saying that you are happy with the transcript.

At the conclusion of the project, you will be sent a summary of the findings via email if you wish.

Where will the research take place?

Interviews will be held in private meeting rooms in places such as public libraries or at the Massey University campuses. The location of the interview will be held at mutually agreed upon location between the participant and the researcher.



Massey University, School of Psychology - Te Kōwhiri te Ora
PO Box 242, Wellington 6140, New Zealand | 494 433 3454 | 494 433 3443 | www.massey.ac.nz



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COLLEGE OF HUMANITIES
AND SOCIAL SCIENCES
E. KŪKA PŌREWA TANGATA

What will happen to the information collected?

I will transcribe the recordings of the interviews. The recordings, transcriptions and any associated notes will be used solely for the purposes of the research project. Recordings and transcripts will be stored securely and only my supervisors and I will have access to the data. No identifying information will be used in the printed transcripts, analysis, findings or reports.

What are my rights as a participant?

You are under no obligation to accept this invitation. If you decide to participate, you have the right to:

- decline to answer any particular question;
- ask for the audio recorder to be turned off at any time during the interview;
- withdraw from the study up to seven days after your interview without reason or penalty;
- ask any questions about the study at any time during participation;
- provide information on the understanding that your name will not be used;
- be given access to a summary of the project findings when it is concluded. I'll ask you to give me your email address if you are interested in receiving this.

Is there any risk to me?

It is anticipated that no risk or harm is likely to occur as the result of participating in this project. However, the interview may bring up upsetting memories of your partner's gender transition, or make you feel uncomfortable due to the personal nature of the questions. In the event that you experience distress or concern during the interview, information about services that are available for support or assistance will be provided. Some of these services are free but some do incur a fee. If I am concerned that you are feeling distressed I will contact my supervisors and discuss this while keeping your identity confidential.

Project Contacts

You may contact me or my supervisors at any point if you have any questions about this project, or to discuss concerns or give feedback. Contact details are provided below:

Krystle Chester: 027 323 1580
krissi.chester@gmail.com

Supervisors: Prof Antonia Lyons, School of Psychology, Massey University
A.Lyons@massey.ac.nz, (04) 801 5799 ext. 63604

Dr Veronica Hopner, School of Psychology, Massey University
V.Hopner@massey.ac.nz, (09) 414 0800 ext. 43101

This project has been reviewed and approved by the Massey University Human Ethics Committee: Southern B, Application 15/19. If you have any concerns about the conduct of this research, please contact Prof Julie Boddy, Chair, Massey University Human Ethics Committee: Southern B, telephone 06 350 5799 x 86055, email humanethicsouthb@massey.ac.nz



Te Kōwhiri
Ki Pihikoro

Massey University, School of Psychology - Te Kōwhiri ki Te Pahi
P.O. Box 100, Palmerston North, New Zealand. Phone: 06 350 5799 x 43101. Email: www.massey.ac.nz

Appendix C

Consent form



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TE KŪLA JOKINGŌA MANGŪKA

Experiences of partners of transgender people

PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM - INDIVIDUAL

I have read the Information Sheet and have had the details of the study explained to me. My questions have been answered to my satisfaction, and I understand that I may ask further questions at any time.

I agree/do not agree to the interview being sound recorded.

I wish/do not wish to have my recordings returned to me.

I agree to participate in this study under the conditions set out in the Information Sheet.

Signature: _____ Date: _____

Full Name - printed _____

Appendix D
Transcript Authority Release form



The experiences of partners of transgender people

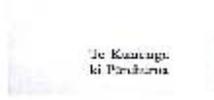
AUTHORITY FOR THE RELEASE OF TRANSCRIPTS

I confirm that I have had the opportunity to read and amend the transcript of the interview(s) conducted with me.

I agree that the edited transcript and extracts from this may be used in reports and publications arising from the research.

Signature: _____ **Date:** _____

Full Name - printed _____



Te Kōwhiri
Kōwhiri

Massey University, School of Psychology - te Kōwhiri Kōwhiri
PO Box 95, Ngārangū #41, Erua 201, Auckland T: 044 801 555 F: 044 801 253 www.massey.ac.nz

Appendix E Support Sheet



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AND SOCIAL SCIENCES
TE KURA HUMANIYAMAANGAIA

The experiences of partners of transgender people

Counselling service and support group details

If you are university student you may be eligible to free counselling services. Please contact the researcher on 027 323 1580 or krissi.chester@gmail.com for more details.

Lifeline

<http://www.lifeline.org.nz/>

Lifeline provides inexpensive face-to-face and telephone counselling. Fees for face-to-face counselling are set at 0.1% of an individual's annual income, and telephone counselling is free.

Contact details for face to face counselling

Northland 09 437 0658, northland@lifeline.org.nz

Auckland 09 909 8750, face2face@lifeline.org.nz

Hamilton 07 838 0715, waikato@lifeline.org.nz

Taranaki 06 757 9493, aranaki@lifeline.org.nz

Contact details for telephone counselling

If you are a user of the Auckland DHB mental health services, you can use their Warmline service, which operates seven days per week, 6pm to midnight. Their contact number is 0508 927 654.

Alternatively you can contact the Help Line on 0800 543 354 or 09 522 999 if you live within Auckland. This line is open 24 hours a day, seven days per week.

Relationships Aotearoa

<http://relationships.org.nz/>

Relationships Aotearoa provide inexpensive face-to-face counselling services throughout New Zealand.

Contact details

Whangarei 09 437 0712, whangarei@relationships.org.nz

Central Auckland 09 525 1051

Hamilton 07 839 3267, hamilton@relationships.org.nz

Wellington 04 385 1729, wellington@relationships.org.nz

Palmerston North 06 357 6483, palmerstonnorth@relationships.org.nz

Christchurch 03 741 9201, christchurch@relationships.org.nz

Dr Krissi Chester
PhD student

Massey University School of Psychology | Te Kura HUMANIYAMAANGAIA
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TE KURA PŪHEHE TAŪMAUA

Dunedin 03 477 6766, dunedin@relationships.org.nz
Invercargill 03 218 2308, invercargill@relationships.org.nz

[For more contact details, please see the Relationship Aotearoa website.](#)

Skylight

<http://skylight.org.nz/>

Skylight provides lower cost face-to-face counselling services in Wellington central, Porirua, Lower Hutt, Wairarapa and Auckland. Fees are \$50.00 per hour for people with Community Services cards and \$90.00 per hour without a Community Services card.

For counselling enquiries phone 04 920 9967 (within Wellington), 0800 299 100, or email css@skylight-trust.org.nz

Tranzform

<http://tranzform.org.nz>

Tranzform is a support group for transgender people and their allies aged 30 or younger based in Wellington city. Contact tranzform.wgtn@email.com or 022 695 0394.

Youthline

<http://www.youthline.co.nz/>

Youthline provides face-to-face counselling services to people in the Auckland, Christchurch and Otago. They also provide free telephone counselling services nationwide.

Contact details

0800 37 66 33 24 hours per day, seven days a week

Free text 234 8am to midnight

talk@youthline.co.nz

Appendix F

Interview Schedule

Section one

In this section I will be asking the participants a few contextual questions and then I will move on to questions regarding their experience of their partners' transition.

- Can you tell me a bit about yourself?
- How old are you and your partner?
- Do you have any children?
- What ethnic groups do you identify with?
- What is your occupation?
- Are you and your partner still together?

Section two

- How would you identify your gender? (Alternatively, what is your gender identity?)
- What is your (former) partner's gender identity?
- How long have (were) you and your partner been together?
- Tell me about your relationship with your (former) partner prior to their disclosure of their trans identity and/or transition.
- Tell me about the time that you found out about (former) your partner's gender identity.
Probes: how did you find out? What happened? What did you feel during these times?
What was your reaction? What do you think looking back upon it now?
- Tell me about your relationship with your (former) partner after they disclosed their trans identity and began their transition. Probe: Did your relationship change? If so, how?
- Tell me how you experienced your (former) partner's disclosure of their trans identity and gender transition. Probes: How did you feel? How did you react? What are some of the

things that you expected? What are some of the things that you did not expect? What were some of the challenges of the transition? How did you manage these? What were some of the positives of the transition?

- Tell me about the coming out experience. Does your family know? How about your friends and work mates? How did these people react?
- How has your worldview changed during your (former) partner's transition?
- How do you feel that you have changed during your (former) partner's transition?
- Has your sexual identity changed during your partner's transition? If so, could you please elaborate?
- How would you describe your relationship in terms of sexual orientation? That is, how did you identify it before the transition and after the transition?
- Is there anything else you would like to add?
- Do you have any advice for other people going through a similar experience?
- Lastly, do you know anyone who has or had a partner who went through a gender transition? If so, do you think they would be willing to talk to a researcher about their experience?

Appendix G

Letter of Support



30th March 2015

Massey University Human Ethics Committee
Research Ethics Office,
Massey University Turitea Campus
PALMERSTON NORTH

Tēnā koutou,

Re: **The experiences of partners of transgender people**
Ms Krystle Chester

The primary investigator, Ms Krystle Chester, is seeking ethical approval to conduct an investigation of the experiences of the partners of transgender people. This study plans to utilise interpretative phenomenological analysis to explore the experiences of these people (described by the student as cis gender). The study will form the basis of Krystle's Master's thesis and is supervised by Professor Antonia Lyons and Dr Veronica Hopner.

I have read through Krystle's research proposal which is well written and thorough and I further noted that she has given thoughtful consideration to the issue of ensuring that her research is conducted in a manner that is culturally respectful. I have also met with Krystle in person, and am confident that she will carry out her research in a culturally appropriate manner in relation to her engagement with Māori participants. On this basis I have also indicated to Krystle that I would be willing to act as a bicultural consultant to her project should she require advice pertaining to Māori participants who consent to participate in her research.

I wish Krystle and her supervisors all the best as they embark on this novel and relevant piece of research. If you have any further enquires please don't hesitate to contact me.

Noho ora mai rā,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads 'Simon Bennett'.

Simon Bennett, PhD
Ngāti Whakaue, Ngāti Wai, Ngāi Tahu
Kaimatai Hinengaro Matua: Maori Clinical Psychologist, Senior Lecturer
School of Psychology, Massey University Wellington
Telephone: +64 (04) 801 5799 ext. 63609

Appendix H

Ethical Approval



MASSEY UNIVERSITY
TE KUNENGA KI PŪREHUROA

5 May 2015

Krystle Chester
15 Rochester Street
Wilton
WELLINGTON 6012

Dear Krystle

Re: HEC: Southern B Application – 15/19
The experiences of partners of transgender people

Thank you for your letter dated 4 May 2015.

On behalf of the Massey University Human Ethics Committee: Southern A I am pleased to advise you that the ethics of your application are now approved. Approval is for three years. If this project has not been completed within three years from the date of this letter, reapproval must be requested.

If the nature, content, location, procedures or personnel of your approved application change, please advise the Secretary of the Committee.

Yours sincerely

Prof Julie Boddy, Chair
Massey University Human Ethics Committee: Southern B

cc Prof Antmia Lyons
School of Psychology
PN320

Dr Veronica Hopner
School of Psychology
ALBANY

Prof James Liu
School of Psychology
ALBANY

Massey University Human Ethics Committee
Accredited by the Health Research Council
Research Ethics Office: Research and Enterprise

Massey University, Tawa Bag 1 222, Palmerston North 4402, New Zealand T 06 3566075, 06 3505575 F 06 350 5822
E human.ethics@massey.ac.nz; a.m.l@massey.ac.nz; p.r@massey.ac.nz www.massey.ac.nz

Appendix I

Letter to Agender



13 May 2015

Lynda Whitehead
Agender

Dear Lynda,

My name is Krystle Chester. I'm undertaking a research project to fulfil the requirements for completing a Master's of Science degree in Psychology, at Massey University. This project is being supervised by Professor Antonia Lyons and Dr Veronica Hopner in The School of Psychology.

I am interested in the experiences of current and former partners of transgender people as they transition into their self-identified gender and how partners understand their own experiences. My research project could give partners of transgender people an opportunity to talk about their experiences, which could be beneficial. Having a better understanding of how partners experience the gender transition of their partners could help mental health professionals, friends and family better support them. Very little research has been done in this area and as far as I am aware none has been done in New Zealand.

I would like to invite eligible members of Agender to participate in my project and request that ineligible members to pass on the details of my project to potential participants. Members are under no obligation to be involved in my project. Additionally, if there are any private rooms available for interviewing, then please let me know. For more details of the project, please see enclosed for the information sheet. Please do not hesitate to contact me or my supervisors if there are any queries.

Yours sincerely,

Krystle Chester

Appendix J

Letter to Tranzform



13 May 2015

To the coordinator
Tranzform
Wellington

To whom it may concern,

My name is Krystle Chester. I'm undertaking a research project to fulfill the requirements for completing a Master's of Science degree in Psychology, at Massey University. This project is being supervised by Professor Antonia Lyons and Dr Veronica Hopner in the School of Psychology.

I am interested in the experiences of current and former partners of transgender people as they transition into their self-identified gender and how partners understand their own experiences. My research project could give partners of transgender people an opportunity to talk about their experiences, which could be beneficial. Having a better understanding of how partners experience the gender transition of their partners could help mental health professionals, friends and family better support them. Very little research has been done in this area and as far as I am aware none has been done in New Zealand.

I would like to speak with the members of Tranzform about my project to invite any eligible members to participate and request that ineligible members to pass on the details of my project to potential participants. This is completely optional and members are under no obligation to be involved in my project. For more details of the project, please see enclosed for the information sheet. Please do not hesitate to contact me or my supervisors if there are any queries.

Yours faithfully,



Krystle Chester

19 College
E. Palmerston

Massey University, School of Psychology - Te Hui Hōkaiwai
PO Box 750, Wellington, New Zealand. T. 04 479 0965 F. 04 479 0966 www.massey.ac.nz

Appendix K

Letter to Straight Spouse Network



13 May 2015

To the coordinator
Straight Spouse Network
Wellington

To the coordinator,

My name is Krystle Chester. I'm undertaking a research project to fulfill the requirements for completing a Master's of Science degree in Psychology, at Massey University. This project is being supervised by Professor Antonia Lyons and Dr Veronica Hopner in the School of Psychology.

I am interested in the experiences of current and former partners of transgender people as they transition into their self-identified gender and how partners understand their own experiences. My research project could give partners of transgender people an opportunity to talk about their experiences, which could be beneficial. Having a better understanding of how partners experience the gender transition of their partners could help mental health professionals, friends and family better support them. Very little research has been done in this area and as far as I am aware none has been done in New Zealand.

I would like to invite eligible members of the Straight Spouse Network to participate in my project and request that ineligible members to pass on the details of my project to potential participants. Members are under no obligation to be involved in my project. Additionally, if there are any private rooms available for interviewing, then please let me know. For more details of the project, please see enclosed for the information sheet. Please do not hesitate to contact me or my supervisors if there are any queries.

Yours faithfully,



Krystle Chester

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