

## ABSTRACT

Title of Document: IMPROVING SURVEY MEASUREMENT QUESTIONS FOR SEXUAL MINORITIES AND THE TRANS POPULATION: TOWARD AN UNDERSTANDING OF THE SOCIALLY CONSTRUCTED NATURE OF THE TRANS LIFE COURSE.

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Sexual minorities are a hidden population who are difficult for social researchers to analyze well. One specific group of sexual minorities, the transgender population, and how they understand their sometimes changing identities, may be especially complex to study. Not only is this sometimes a hidden population, but they may only identify as transgender at certain points in the life course, preferring other identity categories at different life stages and in different circumstances. I use the shortened term “trans” to refer to all members of what the hegemonic gendered order would consider gender non-conforming. Using the overarching sociological concepts of social constructionism and classification and drawing on a life course perspective, this dissertation explores how the self-identity of members of the trans community might shift across the life course. The goal then is to better understand trans identity

awareness and developments across the life course in order to make better sense of existing survey data as well as to improve future questions related to trans identity.

Analysis for this dissertation drew upon data collected from 139 in-depth cognitive interviews in both English and Spanish from a project related to testing a new sexual identity question for the National Health Interview Survey conducted by the Questionnaire Design Research Laboratory at the National Center for Health Statistics to explore how survey wording affects what researchers know, or think they know, about sexual identity distribution, particularly as it relates to trans identity. It also drew upon data collected from 10 in-depth qualitative interviews done with members of the trans community in order to explore how an understanding of the trans life course enables us to make better sense of the ways in which this group identifies on official surveys. A sociological approach, one particularly embedded in social constructionism, was used to address the improvement of a survey research question.

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TOWARD AN UNDERSTANDING OF THE SOCIALLY CONSTRUCTED  
NATURE OF THE TRANS LIFE COURSE

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This dissertation is dedicated to:

My Parents

Dan and Jane Ryan

for teaching me how to be a good person

&

My Role Models

Travis Campbell, Reg Tyson, and Mark Reilley

for teaching me how to be a good sexual minority person

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## Chapter I: Introduction

Developing a “good” sexual identity question has no doubt been one of the most challenging tasks facing survey researchers interested in sexuality and the health of sexual minority populations as well as sexuality researchers who use survey methods. Recent commitments by Secretary of Health and Human Services, Kathleen Sebelius, as well as by President Barack Obama himself, to developing such a question have drawn increasing attention to this important and increasingly politicized task. Perhaps the greatest challenge facing those attempting to accomplish this task is the multiple ways in which various segments of the population conceive of sexual identity. These multiple meanings become even more complex when one considers that there are neither objective indicators nor tangible markers for sexual identity. And the complexity becomes even more entangled when one considers the vantage point of those who are trans.

No discussion of trans anything, least of all trans identity, should begin without first establishing a clear definition of what exactly is meant by trans. Trans people come in all shapes and sizes. They come in all colors, religions, ages, and political affiliations. This does not make them so different from many other communities. What does make them different, however, is that they also come in all genders, and not just the checkbox two. There are male to females, (MTF), female to

males (FTM), female bodied transpeople (Cromwell 1999), genderqueers, transsexuals, transvestites, drag queens, cross dressers, gender fuckers, gender outlaws (Bornstein 1995), androgynous, gender warriors, males, females, transmales, and transfemales, just to name some of the identity labels taken on by different people who we consider under the umbrella of “trans”<sup>1</sup>. They also come in all varieties of sexual orientation. They identify their sexuality as heterosexual, gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, butch, fag, slave grrrl (Bridle, 2012), girly boy, asexual, and an assortment of other identities.

Various authors have defined transgender in different ways. As Stryker (2008) notes, “because “transgender” is a word that has come into widespread use only in the past couple of decades, its meanings are still under construction” (1). She goes on to note that “the term implies movement away from an initially assigned gender position. It most generally refers to any and all kinds of variation from gender norms and expectations” (19). Feinberg (1996) also uses the term to refer to individuals whose gender expression defies social expectations. Others use the term to describe individuals who experience an incongruence between their birth sex and their gender identity (Gay and Lesbian Medical Association 2001; American Public Health Association 1999; Center for Substance Abuse Treatment 2001).<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> I will discuss later a more specific definition of “trans”.

<sup>2</sup> Some other examples include:

- Gagne et. al. (1997) claim that “while transgenderism is an issue of sex and gender, it does entail aspects of sexual reorientation” (*italics in original*, 232). They define transgenderism as “an umbrella term that encompasses a variety of identities – including transsexual, fetish, and nonfetishistic cross-dresser; drag queen; and other terms – as devised by individuals who live outside the dominant gender system” (232).
- Marech (2007) defines transgender as “an umbrella term for transgression of the binary gender system. May include surgical, hormonal or nonhormonal changes that result in a gender identity different from the one assigned at birth” (53-54).

In this dissertation, I will not grapple with the varied understandings of the word transgender. I do not wish to enter into the linguistic/conceptual debate over how best to label someone. Instead, **I will simply use the shortened term “trans” to refer to all members of what the hegemonic gendered order would consider gender non-conforming.** As Keatley and Castro (2008) have noted “‘Trans’ can be shorthand for transgender and transsexual and a number of additional gender identities.” However, I will respect and take note of how certain authors and individuals choose to be labeled but in general, will retain the use of the term “trans” as a less-than-perfect catch-all for the less-than-perfectly defined set of individuals to which I want to refer.

The trans life course, like trans identity itself, is fluid, complicated, and a rupture of the modernist notion of binary equivalences. An understanding of such a life course, therefore, requires countless disclaimers, qualifiers, and nuances. This dissertation, therefore, will not attempt to present a comprehensive, or even partially comprehensive, presentation of such a complicated phenomenon. To do so would go against the very essence, ironically speaking, of the trans life course itself. Instead, it will attempt to further our understanding of such a complicated phenomenon by presenting one coherent piece of a much larger incoherent puzzle. Anything else would imply a misunderstanding of the issue itself.

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- Jessica Xavier et. al. (2007) in an appendix to their report entitled “The Health, Health-Related Needs, and Lifecourse Experiences of Transgender Virginians” define transgender as “an umbrella term used to describe gender variant people, who have identities, expressions or behaviors not traditionally associated with their physical sex or their birth sex. It is preferred by most transgender people over the clinical terms transvestite and transsexual, which do not accurately describe all transgender people and also have a clinical stigmatizing connotation. Transgender is commonly mistaken to mean transsexual, and it is important to note that most transgender people do not wish to change their sexual anatomy” (47).

The first qualifier, not ironically, should be that there are those in the trans community who would argue with the idea that the trans community cannot be presented as a coherent whole. In fact, there are those who feel very strongly that the trans community should be presented as such in order to bring order to the implied chaos of the often highly misunderstood trans world. These advocates feel very strongly that such a move is necessary in order to advance the political rights and social community of trans peoples (Roen 2002). These individuals feel that their very existence is political, that their very being challenges, and in very many ways defies, what they consider the closed and antiquated system of dual genders. Outness, to them, signifies a political statement and a call to revolutionize the established order of gender. As Califa (1996) exhorts:

Staying in the closet, whether it's the lavender closet or a leather closet or a gender closet, just doesn't work. Our enemies feret us out. They won't allow us to remain hidden. We have a choice between becoming more public and fighting for our right to exist, or being marginalized until we are dead or invisible. (Califa 1996: 28)

In this instance, the personal becomes undoubtedly political.

On the other hand, there are those in the trans community who do not want to identify with such a community at all. To do so would defy the very goal of their existence – to transition to the other sex and/or gender. This more modernist perspective does not seek to radicalize the binary notions of sex and gender but rather to allow more fluidity between their boundaries. Those in this camp do not wish to *be*

trans, but rather *to* trans (to transition from a female to a “normal” male, for example).

So how can one make sense of such a diverse and varied community? The short answer is that one cannot. One part of the community wishes to be unite under an identifying banner but the other, placed under said banner by the hegemonic order, seeks to destabilize any analysis claiming to speak for the whole. This complication presents particular challenges for any researcher wishing to write a dissertation about such a diverse and complicated community.

This dissertation will use a sociological perspective to unpack how the complexity of the trans life course does often (though not always) share certain pivotal moments or experiences, that there are certain life events whose understanding can help further the knowledge of trans life, and of studying it. This contribution of understanding will contribute to the fight for trans liberation, from both political oppression as well as conceptual homogenization while simultaneously presenting options for making sense of existing data on trans people.

### Social Constructionist Framework

Social constructionism is used to explore how members of the trans community<sup>3</sup> shift their self-identity across the life course *in relation to categorizing themselves in survey measurement*. I want to draw particular attention to the fact that

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<sup>3</sup> As will be reiterated throughout this dissertation, although members of the trans population are also sometimes sexual minorities, they are also sometimes part of the sexual majority (i.e. heterosexuals). For this reason, a review of literature on the socially constructed nature of sexual minorities will not be the focus (nor will the constructed nature of the sexual majority) as social constructionism is the framework, not the content and the trans population is the focus, not the addendum. Where sexual minority literature more broadly is included and discussed, it is done so as a gateway to understanding the trans population, not as an end in itself.



my interest is in trans identity as it relates to survey measurement. Although trans identity development and trans identity shifts across the life course are highly interesting topics in their own right, and will no doubt inform the purpose of this dissertation to some extent, they are not the focus. The focus, instead, is on how trans people identify on surveys and how best to capture the trans community on said surveys given the potentially shifting nature of their identity. The goal then is to use a life course framework to better understand this identity shift in order to make better sense of survey data and to improve survey measurement of this community.

The sociological concept of social constructionism provides a framework for understanding trans identity. Social constructionism, or simply constructionism, asserts that what individuals hold to be objectively “real” in terms of social products are, in fact, themselves social creations (Berger and Luckmann 1966). In other words, it is only through continuous social reproduction that social “realities” come into, and maintain, their existence. This situation as both social product and social production means that social phenomena are always open to change. More to the point, phenomena are not only open to change but are, in fact, quite likely to change as the social actors reproducing said products change.

Social constructionism also asserts that what is viewed as “normal” and what is viewed as “deviant” is also dependent upon the social context in which it is being considered. As Girshick (2008) notes, “what we believe – how we think about ourselves, our relationships, our social world – has less to do with scientific or biological “facts” and more to do with profound familial, cultural, and social training that reinforces what is considered “normal” (5). This training, as it were, is a product

of socialization and heavily influenced by the geographic location, the cultural context, the legal framework, and the sociohistorical moment in which it is taking place. Wilchins (2006/1997; 549) gives a concrete, albeit humorous, example of the meaning of what it is to view something as a social construction:

Characteristics of mine that are truly innate....ought to be totally apparent to you whether you'd ever seen another human being or not, even if you'd only seen me mounted like the gendertrash insect that I am, even if you were a Martian seeing your first humanoid, or a weiner-dog viewing its first vertically challenged primate. Any other readings of my body are culturally relative, contingent upon the context in which you locate me. Hence, if we lived among the Munchkins, you'd argue I was naturally a giantess, while if we lived among the New York Knicks, you'd insiste I was somewhat short.

In this dissertation, I discuss three key aspects of the social constructionist approach important to the research questions at hand – the importance of historical setting, geographic implications, and legal frameworks.

### *The Socio-Historical Legal Construction of Race on the United States Census*

One example of a socially constructed “reality” is racial categories. For many, race has an objective concreteness that they believe is based in immutable facts – genetics, skin color, etc. A constructionist perspective, however, challenges this notion and instead asserts that racial categorizations are a creation of society, and ones that are particularly dependent upon the historical moment, geographic setting,

and legal framework in which they are situated. The United States Census provides one example of the shifting and constructed nature of race that has been well studied (Hirschman et. al. 2000; Kibria 1998; Nagel 1994; Nagel 2003; Portes and MacLeod 1996). Many have critiqued the US Census' construction of racial categories, including its differentiation of Hispanic or Latino as an "ethnicity" rather than a "race".

The availability to identify oneself on an official survey is often limited by the response categories available to the respondent (and many times, even in cases where a write-in option is available, these responses are recoded to fit one of the other categories). One way to understand the socially constructed nature of a concept, therefore, is to examine the historical evolution of survey response options. Although trans has yet to be asked on a national level official survey, the example of race on the United States Census provides an alternative case study that can be used to illustrate the theoretical nature of this point.

An examination of the changing response options available on the United States Census clearly demonstrates how the options given to people to legally define their racial category is dependent upon the historical moment in which the census is being asked as well as the geographic location of the respondent. The first census in the United States was administered in 1790 and used to count free White males over the age of 16, free White males under the age of 16, free White females, all other free persons detailed by age and "color" (which excluded "Indians not taxed"), and Slaves. The 1850 Census changed the category options to White, Black, and Mulatto. In 1860, the categories of "American Indian" and "Chinese (California only)" were

added. By 1870, the distinction of “California only” was dropped from Chinese but added to the new category – Japanese (California only). The 1890 Census became even more complex, especially along the lines of percentage of Black blood offering new options of quadroon and octoroon and with the following instructions and definitions:

Be particularly careful to distinguish between blacks, mulattoes, quadroons, and octoroons. The word “black” should be used to describe those persons who have three-fourths or more black blood; “mulatto,” those persons who have from three-eighths to five-eighths black blood; “quadroon,” those persons who have one-fourth black blood; and “octoroon,” those persons who have one eighth or any trace of black blood.

The 1900 Census simplified this complex structure of percent black blood to the single category of “Black (Negro or of Negro decent)” and a new category of “Other” was added although no definition or explicit instruction was given on exactly what this category might mean. By 1910, the parenthesis of Negro or of Negro descent had been dropped to just say “Black”. The 1930 Census saw a new wave of racial categories including White, Negro (now used instead of Black), Indian, Japanese, Chinese, Filipino, Hindu, Korean, Mexican, Other. By 1940, Mexican was dropped and “other” was changed to “other race”. In 1950, Hindu and Korean were dropped. In 1960, Indian was changed to “American Indian” and four new categories were added for Hawaiian, Part Hawaiian, Aleut, and Eskimo. By 1970, the categories were

White, Negro or Black, Indian (Amer.), Japanese, Chinese, Filipino, Hawaiian, Korean, and Other. In 1980, there was another explosion of categories re-adding Eskimo and Aleut as well as new categories of Asian Indian, Samoan, Guamanian, and Vietnamese. In 1990, the category of “Other API” (meaning Asian or Pacific Islander) was added. In 2000, it was changed to White, Black, African American, or Negro, American Indian or Alaska Native, Asian Indian, Chinese, Japanese, Filipino, Korean, Vietnamese, Native Hawaiian, Samoan, Guamanian or Chamorro, Other Asian, Other Pacific Islander, Some other race. These categories remained unchanged in the most recent 2010 Census. It is also worth noting that the 1980 Census began asking a question about Hispanic Origin just before the race question<sup>4</sup>.

All of these changes point to the shifting ways by which the United States Census (and no doubt many other aspects of society) constructs racial categories. Interestingly, the other category that has been present in every Census with no evolution is that of “White”, a telling indicator of how the majority often sets the standard against which everything else is measured. The category of “Black” has also had an interesting evolution including, at various historical moments, different categories depending on what percentage of Black one was. Other categories, like those of Aleut and Eskimo, have appeared and disappeared, only to reappear again. And still others, like that of Mexican and Hindu, enjoyed only a brief existence as categories on the Census, often not appearing more than one or two rounds.

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<sup>4</sup> The question was actually first asked in 1970, although it was only asked of 5% of households. It was not until 2000 that the question was included for all households.

All of these changes do not indicate that certain racial categories have not always been in existence, or that they have now become extinct, but rather point to the socially and politically constructed nature of these categories. The political climate, legal standing of persons (especially Blacks and American Indians), and general social attitudes towards categories of people have all influenced the appearance, and disappearance, of certain response options as racial categories. We can imagine someone being born a Slave, attending school as a Mulatto, being married as an Octoroon, and dying a Black (Negro or of Negro decent).

Joane Nagel (1995) takes a constructionist approach to understanding identity formation, and particularly changes in ethnic identity, across the life course. She notes that between 1960 and 1990 the number of people in the United States identifying American Indian as their race more than tripled and seeks to explore reasons for this change. In particular, she is interested in ascertaining why, given the relatively pervasive racial and ethnic hierarchies found in the United States, one would choose to switch identities from a dominant identity to a nondominant identity. Nagel's focus on the Census is particularly relevant to this dissertation as she uses it as one means to understand how geography, and especially the historical moment, affect the legal standing offered to people and how this can influence how those people are counted and, more importantly, how they can come to view themselves. She chooses 1960 as her starting point, for example, because she notes that it was the first year in which the Census allowed respondents to select their own racial identification.

One of Nagel's (1994) most persuasive arguments, and key to her constructionist viewpoint, is that "ethnic identity, then, is the result of a dialectical process involving internal and external opinions and processes, as well as the individual's self-identification and outsiders' ethnic designations" (154). She argues that one's self or ethnic self-identity is not only something that can derive from internal forces – such as upbringing or conscious raising, essentially salience – but also from external forces – such as society's imposed social classification or official surveys, essentially structure. These dual forces of salience and structure, however, are constantly being negotiated and renegotiated as one moves through the course of one's life and are highly dependent upon context, historical moment, and legal possibilities and aspirations.

Along these lines, Mary Waters (1990) also argues that changes in ethnic identification can come from both internal and external sources:

The changes in ethnic identification that show up in these reinterview studies and the age changes may reflect actual flux in ethnic identification over the life courses of individuals. However, a portion of these changes may also be owing to the design of the survey or census itself. (Waters 1990: 46)

Like Nagel, Waters' argument then is inherently constructionist as she also notes that the available content of these surveys affects identity reporting as much as a developing or changing internal sense of self might.

I draw on this constructionist approach in two ways. In the first part of my dissertation I will examine the impact of one type of external structure – that is, an

official survey – to understand how certain respondents arrived at the answer they did while others did not. In the second part of my dissertation, I will use in-depth interviewing to further explore the relationship between survey responses and life course identity awareness and development and how the two exist in a dialectical relationship with each one having the potential to shape how the other is understood.

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### Disentangling Understandings of Sexual Identity

It is important to distinguish sexual identity from sexual behavior, sexual attraction, and sexual orientation. *Sexual behavior* is an objective accounting of various physical activities in which a person has engaged. It is often measured and quantified, as for example in the National Survey of Family Growth (NSFG). There is an objective answer, for example, to how many times one has engaged in vaginal intercourse during the last 12 months (putting aside issues of recall, what counts as vaginal intercourse, and so on). *Sexual attraction* is a phenomenon pertaining to the sexual desires, fantasies, and feelings of an individual. It may be difficult to objectively measure and relies on a personal accounting from an individual in order to be known. It is an often unstable, shifting phenomenon that is sometimes difficult even for the individual themselves to describe. Yet various surveys have attempted to capture this phenomenon. The NSFG, for example, asks a question about sexual attraction as follows:



People are different in their sexual attraction to other people. Which best describes your feelings? Are you. . .

- Only attracted to males
- Mostly attracted to males
- Equally attracted to males and females
- Mostly attracted to females
- Only attracted to females
- Not sure

*National Survey for Family Growth 2008*

*Sexual identity* is a self-reported concept that helps individuals define their relationship to their social worlds and those around them. It is a lens through which people make sense of their sexual and social lives and often helps frame how others respond to them (Cast 2003). It can be a shifting identity or a stable one and does not depend on any history or set of objective indicators but rather on the self-reporting of an individual and their own cognizant sense of self. *Sexual orientation*, a term commonly used and confused for the other three, is more of a catch-all term that refers to a combination of one's sexual behavior, attraction, and identity (Badgett and Goldberg 2009; Miller and Ryan 2012), though it need not have "congruent" components (Laumann et. al. 1994; Saewyc et. al. 2004). For example, one could identify as heterosexual, engage in homosexual behavior, and have bisexual fantasies.

There are good reasons to study sexual behavior, attraction, and identity although their relevance to a particular research question will vary considerably. Scholars doing a study on HIV risk assessment, for example, would probably want to focus on sexual behavior. Advertisers interested in images used for marketing purposes might be most interested in sexual attraction. And advocates interested in access to health care and policy issues would likely be most interested in sexual

identity as it can have a tremendous impact on access to medical care, doctor-patient interaction, and treatment bias and discrimination.

This dissertation will focus on sexual identity for a number of reasons. First, it is a self-reported indicator and thus can arguably be measured with more objectivity than behavior or attraction (putting aside cases of response error, which will be discussed extensively throughout this dissertation). Assuming there is no response error, for example, we can know if someone identifies as heterosexual because of the response they give -- nothing else is needed. That is not to say that they *are* heterosexual, whatever that might mean, but it is to say that we can know if they *identify* themselves as such, at least within the confines of a survey response. In other words, because identity is self-reported and because it is self-reported identity that largely shapes one's interpersonal social world, there is no possibility of misreporting except in cases of response error. It is more difficult to know, however, if someone is misreporting their sexual behavior or attraction since the former is especially prone to issues of recall error and the latter is a notoriously difficult concept to standardize, much less operationalize in a series of response options. It should be noted that although behavior and attraction can, and no doubt do, play a large role in shaping one's sexual identity, they do not in and of themselves constitute that identity. Rather, it is the meanings an individual assigns to those behaviors and attractions that define how they come to conceptualize their identity (Plummer 1981; 1995).

A second reason to focus on identity rather than behavior or attraction is because the literature on this topic related to official surveys is evolving, especially as the question is relatively new to the official survey world. This idea, to include sexual

identity as a standard demographic variable, is, in fact, a large part of the motivation behind the Obama administration's push to develop better means of assessing it. In fact, one of the new topic areas for Healthy People 2020 (one of the leading efforts of the Department of Health and Human Services to reduce health disparities and improve the overall health of the United States population) is "Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Health" (Healthy People 2020 Website). Although only two years old, one of the goals of the workgroup formed around this topic area is to improve the means of measuring sexual identity minority populations.<sup>5</sup> This dissertation, therefore, can contribute to this relatively recent, and still highly fragmented, literature.

Although sexual identity is arguably easier to measure than behavior or attraction (as discussed above), its measurement still presents unique challenges (Gates 2011a). As Miller and Ryan (2012), have noted:

Sexual identity is a complex concept that is rooted in social and political contexts and changes over the course of an individual's life. Consequently, individuals' sexual identities do not necessarily conform to discrete, objective and uniformly-designed categories.

(Miller and Ryan 2012: 2)

This issue is further complicated by the fact that sexual minorities and sexual non-minorities often have very different interpretations and salience of their sexual identity. Thus, sexual identity tends to be much more salient among those identifying as gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender versus those who identify as heterosexual. In

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<sup>5</sup> I am a member of this workgroup and one of the leads on improving survey questions related to sexual identity.

fact, many heterosexuals do not even believe they have a sexual identity or simply have not thought about it (Katz 1995). Others heterosexuals often do not so much have a sexual identity as they have a sexual non-identity. That is, they disassociate from a given identity – being gay – more than they associate with their own identity, possessing what is referred to as a ‘not-me’ identity (McCall 2003).

Another reason sexual identity can be difficult to measure is because the range of identifiers people use to name their sexual identity can be so varied. While some may think of themselves using the term “heterosexual”, others might use the term “straight”, and although conceptually similar, a respondent might identify with one and not the other. Similarly, members of the sexual minority are particularly prone to use a variety of identity labels. Response options such as “queer”, “asexual” or “polyamorous” are not often listed as response options with the result that many who might otherwise have selected one of those end up not answering or selecting “something else” or a similar option.

A third complication related to capturing sexual identity is concerns over privacy held by some respondents. Some respondents, particularly sexual minorities, do not wish to publically disclose their sexual identity, or do not wish to disclose it to whatever person or organization might be collecting the survey data. This can be particularly true for in-person surveys or ones that are not confidential.

The issue of transgender adds another layer of complexity to questions of how to make sense of sexual identity as reported on official surveys. Transgender, a term whose meaning will be discussed extensively in the next chapter, is a term used to represent the broad and diverse community of people who are gender non-

conforming. In many instances, their social gender does not “match” their biological sex according to the sociohistoric constructs in which they are living.<sup>6</sup> Transgender people often not only have sexual identities that vary across the life course, but also sex and gender identities<sup>7</sup> that vary across the life course as well. Their reporting of sex, gender, and sexual identity, therefore, is often more elastic than that of the non-trans population making measurement of such identities particularly complex to study.

### Summary and Research Questions

This dissertation grows out of my previous work both as a member and activist of the LGBT community as well as my formal employment as a behavioral scientist working on national official health surveys for the National Center for Health Statistics (NCHS), where I specialize in research on sexual identity measurement. I have also taught courses on the sociology of gender and the sociology of sexuality, given over 60 invited lectures on topics related to homosexuality, and spent nearly two years working as a specialist on sexual identity on official surveys. This dissertation is borne of a desire to combine my passion for LGBT advocacy with opportunities presented by my current employment to push for better measurement of sexual identity and trans identity on official surveys.

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<sup>6</sup> It should be noted that these constructs are particularly sensitive to time and place. A man wearing high heels, a wig, a corset, make-up, tights, and a frilly shirt would, in contemporary D.C., no doubt be considered a drag queen. In D.C. 200 years ago, however, he would have been considered a founding father and the epitome of masculinity.

<sup>7</sup> A sex identity is related to the biological makeup of an individual while a gender identity is related to how they feel (as a man or a woman or a something else) and how they align with socially prescribed gender roles.

The first part of this dissertation will focus on improving sexual identity measurement on official surveys. It is based largely on a report that I co-authored (with Dr. Kristen Miller, Director of the Questionnaire Design Research Laboratory [QDRL] in the Office of Research and Methodology at NCHS) entitled “Design, Development and Testing of the NHIS Sexual Identity Question” (Miller and Ryan 2012).<sup>8</sup> The report itself, described more extensively in chapter IV, was based on survey pre-testing interviews used to develop an improved sexual identity question for the National Health Interview Survey (NHIS). If current field tests indicate the question is “working,” the question will be implemented on the 2013 NHIS. This would be the first time a sexual identity question would appear on a general health survey at the national level.<sup>9</sup>

The second part of this dissertation will focus on improving trans identity measurement on official surveys. It is drawn from a subset of data used to write the aforementioned report on sexual identity. Although the QDRL did not specifically undertake to measure trans identity with the previous project, there is sufficient data available there to do some important analysis on how trans people might identify on official surveys.

The third part of this dissertation will focus on an examination of the trans life course. I conducted interviews with 10 trans individuals in order to explore issues of how their self-identity as gender non-conforming developed and changed over the life

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<sup>8</sup> Dr. Miller has authorized the reproduction here of sections of this report on which I was the author who originally wrote the material. A formal written permission is attached in Appendix A and the University of Maryland’s rules regarding this issue is attached in Appendix B

<sup>9</sup> A sexual identity question currently appears on the National Survey for Family Growth, however, this survey does not sample the general population but rather is limited to non-institutionalized individuals aged 15-44.

course. Analysis of these interviews, combined with analysis from the preceding two sections, furthers our ability to understand trans identity measurement issues on official surveys.

I will now present each of my three guiding research questions with more detail on the background and significance of each one.

Question 1: *How might survey wording affect sexual minority and non-minority respondents' choices of self-reported sexual identity and its consequent distribution on official surveys?*

The National Survey for Family Growth (NSFG) began asking a sexual identity question on their 2002 survey. The question was as follows:

Do you think of yourself as. . .

- Heterosexual
- Homosexual
- Bisexual
- Something else

The survey, however, left a high percentage of respondents in the missing categories (which include 'something else', 'don't know' and 'refused' responses). In fact, the number of missing responses was over three times higher than that of the target population itself (that is, gay and lesbian). A revision of the question used since the 2006 NSFG has improved this missing rate dramatically.<sup>10</sup> The question is as follows:

Do you think of yourself as. . .

- Heterosexual or straight
- Homosexual, gay, or lesbian
- Bisexual
- Something else

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<sup>10</sup> It is worth noting that the Williams Institute located at UCLA Law Center recommends using this question for asking sexual identity (Badgett and Goldberg 2009).

Arguably, this change was a result of the changed wording of the survey question and not a dramatic shift in the number of ‘something else’ and ‘don’t know’ respondents to suddenly identify as heterosexual. A closer examination of the missing data, however, reveals that it is not evenly distributed, with higher rates of missing found among those with fewer years of education and among Spanish speakers. Taking consideration of these points and using the already improved 2006 NSFG question as a starting point, the QDRL at NCHS has made suggestions for further improvements to the sexual identity question. Three basic design principles were used as guidelines for the development of this new question – 1) use labels that respondents use to refer to themselves, 2) do not use labels that some respondents do not understand – particularly if those labels are not required by any other group of respondents for understanding, and 3) use follow-up questions to meaningfully categorize those respondents answering ‘something else’ and ‘don’t know’.

Drawing on field testing done for the National Health Interview Survey (NHIS, or often just HIS), this dissertation will examine the extent to which this newly suggested sexual identity question might be able to more accurately capture respondents sexual identity by reducing the number of missing cases as well as the number of misclassifications. In so doing, this question would have the potential to improve what we know about the sexual identity distribution of the general population. My first research question, therefore, is - *How might survey wording affect sexual minority and non-minority respondents’ choices of self-reported sexual identity and its consequent distribution on official surveys?*



Question 2: *How might survey wording affect transgender<sup>11</sup> responses on official surveys?*

One of the central issues facing the trans community today is not only *to be* counted, but also how to be *properly* counted. If and how trans people are counted has a huge impact on what we know, or what we think we know, about the trans community. When trans people are not counted, we know nothing, but when trans people are counted incorrectly, the implications can be even worse. For example, since current studies only draw on convenience samples (for reasons explained later), the data is more likely to be highly biased and to present an inaccurate picture of the trans community. Many studies, mostly needs-assessment and behavioral risk surveys, have shown the negative social and health differences suffered by trans people with issues related to HIV/AIDS, suicide, homelessness, and a variety of other negative health outcomes. Although many contest this data, including how it was collected, few contest the actual construction of the question used to collect the data.

One of the most common situations where questions (or response options) related to trans identity appear on national surveys is in the context of a sexual identity question. One of the principle problems facing those trying to capture an accurate picture of the trans community through surveys is that many trans people themselves do not want to be counted as such. Previous research has shown, for example, that many trans respondents do not identify as such on official surveys but instead identify as a man when biologically a woman and also across the spectrum of sexuality (Xavier et. al. 2007). For some trans people, identifying as trans, would

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<sup>11</sup> Although I will use the term “trans” to describe the transgender community at large, I will use the term “transgender” when discussing survey response options because it is the term used on most surveys where present and debated for surveys where it is not.

defeat what they have spent their whole lives trying to achieve, to be a member of the “opposite” sex. In this way, for many trans individuals, being transgender is more of a process, a means to an end (of becoming the opposite sex), than it is an end goal (of becoming transgender). It is not that they want to be trans but that they want to *transition* to another sex and/or gender. That said, there are still arguably a bedrock of common issues faced by trans people as a community that warrant some kind of official count so they can be more properly understood.

This dissertation will examine the extent to which a newly suggested sexual identity question might be able to more accurately capture transgender respondents’ sexual identity. In so doing, this question would have the potential to improve what we know about the sexual identity distribution among the trans population. It might also help us better understand how many trans people are in the general population. My second research question, therefore, is - *How might survey wording affect transgender responses on official surveys?*

Question 3: *How can we understand the trans life course in a way that might enable us to make better sense of existing (and future) survey data on trans people?*

Although we already have research indicating that trans people do not always identify as such on official surveys (Xavier et. al. 2007), more work needs to be done to know at what points in their life course trans people identify in what ways. For example, at what point does a male-to-female transgender individual identify as male, female; and/or as heterosexual<sup>12</sup>, homosexual, bisexual, transgender, or any other

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<sup>12</sup> It is important to note, and will be repeated throughout this dissertation, that not all trans people at one time considered themselves to be gay or lesbian. That is, contrary to popular assumption, not

identity? Are there certain pivotal moments in their life course at which they shift how they identify? To what extent is this identity a series of static sequential categorizations or more of a poststructural flow or more of an anti-identity identity?

A change in how one identifies is, no doubt, more often a process rather than an instantaneous transition. The question of trans identity, like that of sexual identity more broadly, is itself a complicated question often involving a transitional process rather than a momentary change. That is, it is more akin to a change from childhood to adolescence – a non-discreet continual change – rather than a change from single to married – a discreet change that occurs at a particular moment in time. In terms of official surveys, however, the change is more like the latter – a question of placing oneself in a particular box at a particular moment in time. That is, surveys provide only discreet mechanisms by which to classify one's identity and thus provide limited options for how one can self-identity as a response option. Survey measurement, therefore, provides a particularly interesting way to measure pivotal moments in identity transition. My third research question then becomes - *How can we understand the trans life course in a way that might enable us to make better sense of existing (and future) survey data on trans people?*

### Organization of the Dissertation

The dissertation will be organized as follows: Chapter II will present a review of the relevant literature, namely that related to survey measurement of sexual identity on official surveys, survey measurement of trans identity on official surveys,

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all people who now identify as trans at one time identifies as some other sexual minorities. Many trans people were in stable heterosexual relationships at the moment of their transition and did not, nor do they now, consider themselves to be gay or lesbian.

and trans identity. The goal of the review of these literatures will be to make an argument for how we can use a sociological social constructionist approach to push toward new understandings of how to measure trans on official surveys. Chapter III will present the methods used with some detail given to the process of cognitive interviewing, the exact methods carried out for the data being reviewed, and the method of analysis, namely Q-Notes. Chapter IV will be the first results chapter and will focus on an analysis of 139 cognitive interviews to demonstrate the improved potential of the new question developed by QDRL to more accurately capture sexual identity. Analyses will be made of minority and non-minority populations alike as well as of the English and Spanish versions of the question<sup>13</sup>. Chapter V will also draw on the 139 cognitive interviews but this time with a particular focus on transgender respondents and how survey response options affect their assessment of, and ability to accurately respond to, their own sexual identity. Chapter VI will draw on 10 in-depth qualitative interviews done with trans people in order to explore pivotal transition moments in terms of their identity over the life course. Chapter VII will present a discussion of the overall findings and how the sociological findings from chapter VI can be used to make better sense of the survey research question from chapter V. Findings from this dissertation can be used to improve future survey work related to sexual identity and trans identity, and, consequently, potentially have positive policy implications for the sexual minority community, and particularly for the trans community.

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<sup>13</sup> Note: I am bilingual and so will be able to analyze both the English and the Spanish language data.

## Chapter II: Literature Review

This literature review will have three inter-related parts associated with each of my three principal research questions. The first part will examine the literature related to how sexual identity is measured on official surveys with particular emphasis on how it is measured. The second part will examine the literature related to how trans survey data is currently collected and understood. The third part will examine the phenomena of trans more generally in an effort to provide foundations for understanding the trans life course more fully. I will begin with a brief discussion of the trans experience to ground each of these sections.

As mentioned before, no discussion of trans anything, least of all the life course, should begin without establishing a clear definition of what exactly the author means by trans. Trans people come in all shapes and sizes. They come in all colors, religions, ages, and political affiliations. What does make them different, however, is that they also come in all genders, and not just the checkbox two. As mentioned before, there are male to females, (MTF), female to males (FTM), female bodied transpeople (Cromwell 1999), genderqueers, transsexuals, transvestites, drag queens, cross dressers, gender fuckers, gender outlaws (Bornstein 1995), androgynous, gender warriors, males, females, transmales, transfemales, and an assortment of other identities. They also come in all varieties of sexual orientation. Trans people identify their sexuality as gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, butch, fag, slave grrrl

(Bornstein, online), girly boy, asexual, and a number of other identities limited only by the people creating them.

The origins of defining those whom we might now consider under the umbrella of trans came in 1923 when Magnus Hirschfeld, a German sexologist, coined the term transsexual to refer to men or women who held a gender role opposite to their sex and insisted that they were born into the wrong sex.<sup>14</sup> Later, in 1931, the first male-to-female sex change was performed at Hirschfeld's Institute for Sexual Science in Berlin. The idea of sex-reassignment gained popularity in the 1960s with the writings of John Money (1965; 1968), a United States based surgeon. These ideas became codified in Harry Benjamin's (1966) *Transsexual Phenomena*, a work that some consider "the transsexual's Bible" (King and Ekins 2007). Medicalization of the term, and the phenomenon, continued through the 1970s as the term 'gender dysphoria' gained widespread acceptance as did the idea of a 'gender identity disorder' promulgated largely by the American Psychiatric Association (1973).

Within sociology, two developments affected the course of understandings of trans issues in the 1960s. The first was a rise of the sociology of deviance. The second was the rise of the second wave of the feminist movement and a growing interest in gender (King and Ekins 2007). One of the most influential founding documents of these studies was Anne Oakley's (1972) *Sex, Gender and Society*, which used transsexualism as a paradigmatic argument for the separation of sex and gender. Another influential work came in 1980 with Janice Raymond's *The Transsexual Empire*, which argued that transsexuality was the epitome of male patriarchy and

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<sup>14</sup> Some put the origins of trans studies to an earlier 1910 publication by Hirschfeld on cross-dressing entitled *The Transvestites: An Investigation of the Erotic Desire to Cross Dress*.

gender oppression. Another foundational text, Sandy Stone's (1991) *The Empire Strikes Back: A Posttranssexual Manifesto*, argued that openly identifying as trans, or what Stone calls "reading oneself aloud", was an important step in undermining trans oppression and ultimately in achieving self-empowerment.

The terms 'transgenderal' and 'transgenderist' were first coined in 1969 by Virginia Prince (1957; 1978), who is considered to be the founding mother of the cross-dressing community in the United States and one of the early leading theorists of trans issues<sup>15</sup>. She used the term to describe someone who lives full-time in a gender role opposite the one socially prescribed to match their assigned sex and imagined the term to refer to someone somewhere between a "transvestite" (who occasionally wears the clothes of the other sex) and a "transsexual" (someone who has surgery to reconstruct their genitals).

The 1980s saw the rise of the use of transgender as more of a catch-all term for anyone who fell outside of the usual gender dichotomy. The 1990s saw two major developments in the growth of what Ekins and King (1996) were now calling "the emerging field of transgender studies." First, there was a growing interest in trans related phenomenon in non-Western cultures (Fulton & Anderson 1992; Kulick 1998; Jackson and Sullivan 1999; Nando 1990, 2000). The second development was that the term transgender itself began to take on political implications. The personal for many transgenders was transforming into something deeply political and those outside of the community were coming to see trans as an effective way to challenge the existing sex/gender hierarchy.

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<sup>15</sup> It is interesting to note that Prince had a very open and deep disdain for homosexuals, was opposed to surgical intervention for transsexuals, and held very conservative opinions of what she thought masculinity and femininity should be.

A 1999 textbook on human sexuality speaks of a “new” transgendered community, “one that embraces the possibility of numerous genders and multiple social identities” (Strong, DeVault, Werner Sayad 1999: 142). The textbook even includes a scale of transgenderism ranging from female to male transsexual to androgynous female or male to male to female transsexual. Since the new millennium, there has been a growing stream of individuals with an ever lengthening list of terms to self-identify themselves being categorized under the broader term of “transgender.” This has made defining the term increasingly difficult, particularly for those wishing to talk about this group as any kind of group at all. In other words, attempts to homogenize the term have come up against a serious challenge as the concept itself has become increasingly heterogeneous.<sup>16</sup>

As noted above, I will not grapple with the varied understandings of the word transgender in this dissertation. For purposes of this dissertation, and survey measurement more generally, the goal is not to define a particular term, but rather to figure out which term can be used to best help people properly identify themselves

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<sup>16</sup> As noted before, various authors have defined transgender in various ways. Some examples include:

- Blumenfeld and Raymond (1998: 46) state that “The term “gender transposition” describes the pattern of adherence to or variance from existing definitions of masculinity and femininity.”
- Gagne et. al. (1997) claim that “while transgenderism is an issue of sex and gender, it does entail aspects of sexual *reorientation*” (ital in orig, 232). They define transgenderism as “an umbrella term that encompasses a variety of identities – including transsexual, fetish, and nonfetishistic cross-dresser; drag queen; and other terms – as devised by individuals who live outside the dominant gender system” (232).
- Jessica Xavier et. al. (2007) in an appendix to their report entitled “The Health, Health-Related Needs, and Lifecourse Experiences of Transgender Virginians” define transgender as “an umbrella term used to describe gender variant people, who have identities, expressions or behaviors not traditionally associated with their physical sex or their birth sex. It is preferred by most transgender people over the clinical terms transvestite and transsexual, which do not accurately describe all transgender people and also have a clinical stigmatizing connotation. Transgender is commonly mistaken to mean transsexual, and it is important to note that most transgender people do not wish to change their sexual anatomy” (47).



(although, at times, defining the term for respondents is a useful tool for achieving this goal). Marech (2007) provides one useful definition of transgender by defining it as “an umbrella term for transgression of the binary gender system. May include surgical, hormonal or nonhormonal changes that result in a gender identity different from the one assigned at birth” (53-54). Further, Keatley and Castro (2008) have noted “‘Trans’ can be shorthand for transgender and transsexual and a number of additional gender identities”. To that end, **I will use the shortened term “trans” to refer to all members of what the hegemonic gendered order would consider gender non-conforming.**

In the next section, I will explore the issue of sexual identity measurement on official surveys. As trans identity is entangled with issues of sexual identity (particularly as it is a proposed response option within sexual identity [see Miller and Ryan 2012]), a discussion of trans identity on official surveys will be better informed by first gaining an understanding of sexual identity on official surveys.

#### Part I: Sexual Identity Measurement on Official Surveys

The literature on how sexual identity is measured on official surveys is sparse. Although various studies have looked at how specific segments of the population identify their sexual identity on surveys (for example, adolescents [Austin et. a. 2007], or transgendered people [Grant et. al. 2011]), work is only recently being piloted to put this question on nationally representative population based federal surveys. For this reason, the most meaningful review of the literature in this area lies less with individual tangentially related studies, and more with the method used by

these studies. That is, the most meaningful literature review of this topic will be both methodological and empirical.

A further defense of the assertion that the most meaningful literature review be methodological is that many of the studies that have been done on sexual identity on official surveys have been done with already measured survey data. That is, they take the data as “true” and use it to develop a picture of the sexual identity landscape. I will argue, however, that while that might make these analyses interesting, it also makes them less than completely valid as the assumption underlying each is that the methods used to obtain the numbers are sound. As this dissertation will demonstrate, however, that is not the case. Any (bad) data is not necessarily better than no data at all. Quantitative survey analysis is only as good as the qualitative assumptions on which the surveys used to obtain such data were based. In the case of sexual identity in particular, this work is in its very early stages and thus needs additional research. Where the literature, and the field, can benefit, therefore, is not only through another analysis of the quantitative data, but through an analysis of the assumptions used to obtain said data as well.

### *Cognitive Interviewing*

The first step to developing any good survey question (on sexual identity, trans identity, or otherwise) is to understand how respondents interpret and comprehend the question. According to Tourangeau, Rips, and Rasinski’s (2000) model, respondents must comprehend the question, retrieve relevant memories, integrate all of the relevant memories or facts, and finally map this information onto

the provided response options. Each of these tasks presents an opportunity for error. As a qualitative method of pre-testing survey questions, cognitive interviewing allows researchers to follow the steps taken by the respondent to arrive at their final answer (Presser et. al 2004b). Additionally, cognitive interviewing allows researchers to note different interpretations of the question and response options across respondents (Miller 2011). Cognitive interviewing is currently the primary method of testing utilized by federal statistical agencies in the United States. Ultimately, cognitive interviewing provides rich narratives that can be used to better understand patterns of interpretation across respondents and demographic groups, which can ultimately be used to increase the likelihood that the survey question will perform as intended<sup>17</sup>.

“Cognitive interviewing” does not refer to any single phenomenon (Conrad and Blair 2004). It is, instead, a generic term used to refer to a wide array of related procedures that practitioners combine in varying ways to produce various cognitive interviewing techniques (Willis et al. 1999). Beatty and Willis (2007) assert that practices in the field seem split between two dominating paradigms – one relying on the think-aloud technique and the other relying on targeted probing. Cognitive interviewing as a whole then is often variously described with an emphasis on the think-aloud method (Bercini 1992; Conrad and Blair 1996; Conrad, Blair, and Tracy 2000; Forsyth and Lessler 1991; Royston 1989), both the think-aloud and targeted probing methods (Royston and Bercini 1987; Willis, Royston, and Bercini 1991), and in terms of verbal probing (Bolton and Bronkhorst 1996; Willis 1994) [for more

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<sup>17</sup> Although cognitive interviewing is the primary method used by the federal statistical agencies in the United States, as well as the primary method used in this dissertation, it should be acknowledged that other methods for pre-testing survey questions also exist including behavior coding, vignette analysis, experiments, and formal respondent debriefings. For more on these methods, see Presser et. al. 2004a.

discussion on different varieties of cognitive interviewing see Conrad and Blair 2004 and Willis 2005). Beatty and Willis (2007) provide a definition that seems to encompass most of what would typically be seen as falling under cognitive interviewing by defining it as “the administration of draft survey questions while collecting additional verbal information about the survey responses, which is used to evaluate the quality of the response or to help determine whether the question is generating the information that its author intends” (287).

It is generally accepted among cognitive researchers that respondents go through a basic four stage process – comprehension, recall, judgment, and reporting (Blair and Brick 2009). Ongena and Dijkstra (2007) have noted that this conceptualization is exclusively respondent focused. It is assumed that all respondents go through these same four cognitive processing stages. That is, they will first comprehend the question, then recall information related to the question, then judge which information they deem relevant to answering the question, and finally give a reporting in response to how they comprehended the question. The cognitive processes of the respondent are seen as the focal point of question response. The goal then is not so much simply to receive answers to questions but more so to “focus on the cognitive processes involved in answering them” (Willis 2004: 23-24). In this way, it is not particular answers that are of interest but more so the means by which respondents come to those answers.

The establishment of cognitive interviewing can be traced back to the Advanced Research Seminar on Cognitive Aspects of Survey Methodology (CASM) that was put together by the Committee on National Statistics. The seminar took place

over seven days in 1983 and three more days in 1984. It was during these meetings that a group of cognitive psychologists and survey researchers got together to deliberately attempt to build an interdisciplinary collaborative project. These conferences themselves were based on an earlier workshop hosted by the Bureau of Social Science Research, and supported by the Census Bureau and the Bureau of Justice Statistics, which brought together cognitive scientists and survey statisticians to determine how respondents in the National Crime Survey remembered details of victimization (Loftus 1984). Theoretically, this perspective was also highly influenced by a paper by Ericsson and Simon's (1980) analysis of the validity of verbal reports methods (Willis 2004, 26-27).<sup>18</sup> An important report came out of the CASM conference entitled "Cognitive Aspects of Survey Methodology: Building a Bridge Between Disciplines" which became the bedrock of what would come to be known as cognitive interviewing.<sup>19</sup> That report included what conference attendees had identified as four key characteristics of this collaborative project of cognitive interviewing:

- 1) It should attempt to develop ideas and plans for collaborative research involving cognitive scientists and survey researchers.
- 2) In addition to recall, which was the primary topic of the 1980 workshop, it should consider other cognitive processes that take place in survey interviews, such as comprehension and judgment.

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<sup>18</sup> Survey researchers have worried if their respondents understood their questions as intended for decades before – see, for example, Belson (1968) – and about to what degree the question wording affected answers received as well as Cantril (1944), Payne (1951), and Rothwell (1983, 1985).

<sup>19</sup> The term "cognitive interview", as used by Fisher and Gieselman (1992) is also used by criminologists to describe a procedure to obtain information from event eyewitnesses.

- 3) A small group of experts from the two disciplines, accompanied by a few applied statisticians and representatives of other relevant fields, should meet for an extended period to further their understanding of the areas of intersection between the cognitive sciences and survey research and to stimulate ideas for relevant research.
- 4) Above all, participation in the project should offer potential benefits to members of both disciplines: for survey researchers, through the application of cognitive research to data collection problems; for cognitive scientists, through exploration of the potential uses of surveys as vehicles for cognitive research.

(Loftus 1984: 2)

As Beatty and Willis (2007) have noted, “Cognitive interviewing has emerged as one of the more prominent methods for *identifying and correcting problems* with survey questions” (italics mine) (287). Beatty (2004) has elsewhere noted that the original meeting of CASM was, in fact, “aimed at understanding and reducing errors deriving from survey questions” (45). The focus then is problem detection, as outlined above, and then the resolution of those problems. A traditional CASM research approach then will pre-test a survey in an effort to find problems with it and then hope to present a “better” set of questions at the end of the process.

Although they take some issue with the narrow focus, Beatty and Willis (2007) note that:

Implicit in many discussions regarding cognitive interviewing is the assumption that it should help researchers develop *measurably better*

survey questions – that is, it should be able to identify and eliminate problems until researchers have honed in on an “ideal” question wording. (Beatty and Willis 2007: 304) (ital. in original).

Beatty and Willis also suggest an alternative view in which cognitive interviewing should simply “provide questionnaire designers with insights about the consequences of various questionnaire design decisions” to help them “assess *tradeoffs* – the advantages and disadvantages of asking questions in a certain manner” (304).

### *Construct Definition, Question Design and Question Response Problems*<sup>20</sup>

Prior to designing a survey question, it is necessary to identify the specific construct intended for capture by the particular survey question. For this dissertation, the intended construct is sexual identity, which must be differentiated from other terms used to characterize the sexuality of populations. While the word ‘sexual orientation’ is most often used in today’s lexicon, the term itself is more of a catch-all term that does not specifically pertain to an actual, measurable phenomenon. In its essence the term has come to describe an aspect (or a conglomeration of aspects) that include a person’s history of sexual behavior, how they conceptualize and summarize their attractions toward opposite and same-gender people, and how they have come to understand and label their own selves. These three concepts—attraction, behavior and identity—although inter-related, pertain to different aspects of sexuality and are

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<sup>20</sup> This section was taken largely from the Miller and Ryan (2012) co-authored report. The only parts that were taken from that report were written exclusively by the author of this dissertation. See attached letter in Appendix A and university guidelines in Appendix B.

typically asked as separate questions in survey questionnaires.<sup>21</sup> Additionally, the three differing constructs may be of varying relevance to a particular research study. For example, a study intending to examine the spread of sexually transmitted diseases would likely be more interested in respondents' sexual histories as opposed to the label that individuals use to describe themselves.

In the context of the Healthy People 2020 directive that mandates the monitoring of health disparities among minority populations, the construct of sexual identity is the most appropriate because it most succinctly conveys an individual's relationship to the minority population. Sexual identity is best conceptualized as a concept of self that is formed within a social context and defines for individuals their relationship to other individuals, groups, and sociopolitical institutions within that context (Rust 1993). Furthermore, identities are instrumental in organizing peoples' lives and their everyday interactions, which hold important implication for individuals' behaviors and others' actions toward them (Cast 2003). In the context of health, sexual identity is informative in understanding respondents' access to health care and, subsequently, the quality of care they are provided. It is also informative in understanding risk factors such as diet, exercise, stress and smoking patterns as these factors are closely linked to community as well as self-conception. It is important to note that although individuals may conceptualize their identity within a framework of who they have sex with or who they are attracted to, behavior and attraction in and of themselves do not constitute identity. It is the meaning—specifically the

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<sup>21</sup> QDRL has examined the performance of identity, behavior and attraction questions in previous testing projects. In these studies, findings reveal that these concepts, particularly attraction, are also complex phenomena and that they can be understood differently across groups of respondents. See Q-Bank (<http://wwwn.cdc.gov/QBANK/Home.aspx>) for reports on specific behavior and attraction questions.



interpretations that the individuals assign those behaviors and experiences—that defines how they ultimately conceptualize their identity (Plummer 1981; 1995).

Measuring sexual identity on a survey questionnaire presents unique challenges (Black et. al. 2000; Gates 2011a; Gates 2011b; Gates and Sell 2006). Sexual identity is a complex concept that is rooted in social and political contexts and can change over the course of an individual’s life. Consequently, individuals’ sexual identities do not necessarily conform to discrete, objective and uniformly-defined categories. Additionally, as previous QDRL study of sexual identity questions revealed, the construct, itself, can differ substantially across various sexuality subgroups (Ridolfo et al. 2012). While the concept of ‘sexual identity’ holds a particularly distinct and salient meaning for those identifying as lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender, many non-minority respondents do not hold salient sexual identities. Instead, these respondents (who for all intents and purposes would be categorized as being heterosexual), often dis-identify from a gay identity, possessing what is referred to as a ‘not-me’ identity (McCall 2003). Rather than identifying as heterosexual, these respondents typically identify as ‘not gay’ or ‘normal.’ Table 2.1 summarizes the construct differences between minority and non-minority respondents in three broad categories: salience, conception, and construction.

<b>Table 2.1</b> Salience, conception, and constructs of sexual identity for minority and non-minority respondents		
	<b>Non-Minority Patterns</b>	<b>LGBT Patterns</b>
Salience	Lack of salient sexual identity	Highly salient
Conception	No concept of sexual identity but rather dis-identification	Identity rooted in complex process of negotiating and forming a sexual identity
Construction	“not me,” “I’m normal,” “soy mujer,” “I don’t know”	Shifting sexual identity; For transgender respondents, intersection of gender and sexuality

This lack of construct comparability may generate relatively disparate data across minority and non-minority groups, though more significantly, it generates different types of response patterns. Table 2.2, then, illustrates that for both minority and non-minority respondents, misclassification and missing data errors can occur, however for different reasons. Non-minority respondents who do not identify with a particular sexual identity are not always familiar with the response categories, specifically, the terms ‘heterosexual,’ ‘homosexual’ and ‘bisexual.’ For example, previous cognitive interviewing studies found that respondents can confuse the words ‘homosexual’ and ‘heterosexual,’ believing that ‘heterosexual’ is the equivalent of being gay and that ‘homosexual’ is the equivalent of being straight (Ridolfo et al. 2005). Additionally, some cognitive interviewing respondents, not knowing the terminology, surmise that the term ‘bisexual’ means ‘heterosexual,’ concluding that ‘bi’ means two: one man and one woman. This lack of understanding contributes to relatively high rates of missing data or misclassification (Ridolfo et al. 2012).

<b>Table 2.2</b> Misclassification and missing data errors for minority and non-minority respondents		
<b>Non-Minority Patterns</b>	<b>Result</b>	<b>LGBT Patterns</b>
<i>Because doesn't know terminology</i>	High rate of 'something else'	<i>Because uses another label</i>
<i>Because doesn't know terminology</i>	High rate of 'Don't know'	<i>Because shifting sexual identity</i>
<i>Because believes implies heterosexuality</i>	Misclassification into 'bisexual'	<i>Because interprets question as attraction or behavior</i>

These types of problematic response patterns can be contrasted with those found among LGBT respondents. While the problematic response patterns for non-minority respondents center on the lack of a salient sexual identity, problematic response patterns for LGBT respondents are rooted within the complex process of negotiating and forming a sexual identity (Miller 2012; Ridolfo et. al. 2005). The problematic response patterns found among LGBT respondents, then, relate to shifting sexual identities and use of non-traditional categories (e.g. queer, same-gender-loving), and for transgender respondents, to the complex intersection between gender and sexuality. Regarding the implication of question design, the contrast of problematic response patterns suggest that potential design solutions may be at odds for the two groups; while simplifying the question and providing concrete definitions related to sexual behavior and attraction may be the best for non-minority respondents, this solution would likely create more response problems for LGBT

respondents. Previous QDRL work, however, has shown the importance of utilizing categories that respondents use in their everyday lives to describe themselves—a solution that is beneficial for both minority and non-minority respondents. As opposed to the more abstract, scientific labels (i.e. ‘homosexual’ and ‘heterosexual’) which respondents do not always understand and do not use to describe themselves, using the terms ‘straight,’ ‘lesbian,’ and ‘gay’ does indeed improve question performance for many respondents of both populations.

It is impossible to know the extent of misclassification in the survey data that is depicted in Table 2.2. Additionally, it is impossible to determine the extent to which misclassification is improved with the addition of the more meaningful categories. However, as previous QDRL work (Ridolfo, et al. 2012) has shown, it is possible to glean insight by examining those cases that fall into the missing categories, specifically, the respondents who refused or answered ‘don’t know’ or ‘something else.’ Table 2.3 below, which compares the 2002 NSFG and 2006 NSFG survey data, illustrates that survey data collected using the more abstract labels are associated higher rates of ‘something else,’ ‘refused’ and ‘don’t know’ responses. In the 2002 NSFG, in which respondents were only asked about being heterosexual, homosexual, bisexual or something else, a full 6.2 percent of the sample fell into the missing categories. With the simple addition of the terms ‘straight,’ ‘gay’ and ‘lesbian,’ (categories that respondents are more likely to use in their everyday lives) missing rates fell to 1.6 percent.

<b>Table 2.3</b> Comparison of the 2002 and 2006 NSFG sexual identity measures					
	Heterosexual Heterosexual or straight,	Homosexual, Homosexual, gay, (or lesbian,)	Bisexual,	Something else?	Don't Know/Refused
NSFG 2002- 03	89.6	1.7	2.4	4.2	2.0
NSFG 2006- 08	94.5	1.3	2.5	0.4	1.2

Most noteworthy, those missing cases in 2002 did not occur randomly. As illustrated in Table 2.4, those respondents with lower levels of education were more likely to have ‘something else,’ ‘refused’ and ‘don’t know’ responses. In 2002, a full 14.4% of women with less than a high school education, in comparison to 2.1% of those with more than a high school diploma were missing. This relationship changes significantly in the 2006 data—to 3.8% with less than a high school diploma compared to 1.0% for those with more than a high school degree. While women have higher rates of missing data, it is important to note that the relationships mimic the same patterns among the data for men.

<b>Table 2.4</b> Distribution of missing data by education in the 2002 and 2006 NSFG						
Missing data	Men			Women		
	Less than high school	High school	More than high school	Less than high school	High school	More than high school
2002	11.4% (n=1361)	8.0% (n=1505)	2.1% (n=2055)	14.4% (n=1702)	7.9% (n=2167)	2.1% (n=3767)
2006	3.1% (n=1883)	1.6% (n=1590)	0.7% (n=2637)	3.8% (n=1960)	1.2% (n=1844)	1.0% (n=3522)
Note: Missing data = something else, refused and don’t know responses						

By and large, as illustrated in the above tables, the 2006 NSFG design for sexual identity represents a marked improvement from the 2002 design. However, response problems remain. Perhaps most problematic in the 2006 design, the Spanish version of the questionnaire provided no translation for the word ‘straight’ because there is no comparable word in Spanish. Interestingly, as shown in Table 2.5, while the rates of missing decreased most dramatically in 2006 for English interviews, the rate of missing for Spanish language respondents continues to be relatively high at 8.9% and 9.3% for Spanish-speaking men and women, respectively.

**Table 2.5** Percentage of missing data by language and ethnicity in the 2002 and 2006 NSFG

Missing data	Men			Women		
	Spanish Hispanic Interview	English Hispanic Interview	English Non-Hispanic Interview	Spanish Hispanic Interview	English Hispanic Interview	English Non-Hispanic Interview
2002	12.1% (n=359)	10.6% (n=763)	5.1% (n=3793)	12.9% (n=558)	9.5% (n=1031)	5.6% (n=6037)
2006	8.9% (n=451)	1.3% (n=947)	1.0% (n=4708)	9.3% (n=546)	1.2% (n=1053)	1.1% (n=5716)

Note: Missing data = something else, refused and don’t know responses

Additionally problematic, previous cognitive interview findings reveal that the word ‘straight’ is not always understood as intended among English-speaking respondents, who interpret the word to mean ‘straight-laced’ (that is, one who does not partake of alcohol, cigarettes, drugs, or other mind or body altering substances). For those respondents who also believe the word ‘heterosexual’ means being gay, simply inserting the word ‘straight’ does not alleviate problems with misclassification. Similarly, addition of the word ‘straight’ does not clarify the word

‘bisexual’ for respondents who believe the term implies heterosexuality. To be sure, addition of the word ‘straight’ to the English version, alone, does not resolve comprehension problems entirely.

Examination of the relationship between education and missing rates also suggests that a problem remains. As illustrated in Table 2.4, the 2006 NSFG found that women with less than a high school diploma had a missing rate of 3.8% compared to 1.2% for those with a high school diploma and 1.0% for those with more than a high school education. For men, those without a diploma had a missing rate of 3.1% compared to 1.6% for those with a high school diploma and 0.7% for those with more than a high school education. Interestingly, those women without a diploma were also 1.5 times more likely than those with a high school diploma and 1.9 times more likely than those with more than a high school education to answer ‘bisexual.’ Men without a diploma were 1.2 times more likely than those with a high school diploma and two times more likely than those with more than a high school education to answer ‘bisexual.’ The relationship between education and identifying as bisexual either reflects a true relationship or reflects a remaining comprehension problem. Miller and Ryan (2012) have suggested that given the relatively high rates of missing that are related to education (which alone indicates problems with the measure), that it is more likely to be misclassification of those answering ‘bisexual’. This argument, additionally, gains strength with the cognitive interview finding that some respondents believe the term implies being heterosexual (Miller and Ryan 2012).

Next, I will discuss issues of trans identity measurement on surveys in order to address specific issues faced by this often hard to reach and hard to measure population.

## Part II: Constructionism and Trans Identity Measurement on Surveys

A great deal of work remains to be done on the issue of trans identity measurement on surveys. In fact, very little research, especially on methodological issues related to the trans population, has been done to date. Teich (2012) notes that this is “partly because the topic is so new to the masses, partly because a large number of out transpeople willing to participate in a study may be difficult to find, and partly because the topic is so controversial” (77). Rachlin (2009) also cites, “a lack of funding for research on transgender populations, a dearth of mentors for those wishing to undertake such work, and a lack of an established discipline that addresses issues of concern to these populations” (261).

The fledgling (yet growing) field of studies on transgender issues is wrought with unique complications from concept construction to methodology to shifting identities. Previous survey research on the trans population has generally relied on two different methodologies: needs assessment studies conducted on a local and regional level and surveys conducted through non-probability sampling to target the national population. To date, no national level representative sample survey has been conducted to assess trans demography (for reasons to be explained below). There is currently, however, work being done to bring such a survey to fruition.



A number of needs assessment surveys have been conducted in cities across the United States in order to gain insights about health patterns among trans individuals. These studies tend to focus on accessible trans populations, such as sex workers or clinical samples, which often over-represent transsexual individuals. Relying on specific segments within the trans population to make inferences about the larger trans population can have a number of negative consequences, such as over-representing certain health conditions, particularly when tied to particular demographics (Herbst et. al. 2008). While these needs assessment studies are helpful in understanding the respondents included, due to the sampling methods, we cannot use the results found in these types of studies to make inferences about the trans population as a whole or even of the trans population in that community. The most significant impact of these studies has arguably been to highlight the need for more rigorous survey assessments of the trans population.

More recently, researchers have turned to online surveys in order to learn about the trans population at large. These surveys have the advantage of capturing respondents who do not openly identify as trans; however, there is currently no method to randomly sample online, thus researchers rely on gathering large samples in an attempt to compensate for this limitation. The largest of these surveys, The National Transgender Discrimination Survey (NTDS), interviewed 6,456 respondents who identified as transgender or gender non-conforming, using a web survey that was augmented with paper questionnaires for difficult to reach populations (Grant, et al. 2011). Ultimately, the survey received responses from respondents in all 50 states

plus the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico, Guam, and the US Virgin Islands. The NTDS assessed sex and gender using the following questions:

Q2: What sex were you assigned at birth, on your original birth certificate?

- ☐ Male
- ☐ Female

Q3: What is your primary gender identity today?

- ☐ Male/man
- ☐ Female/woman
- ☐ Part time as one gender, part time as another
- ☐ A gender not listed here, please specify \_\_\_\_\_

Results for Q2 found that 60% reported their sex assigned at birth as being male and 40% reported their sex assigned at birth as female. Results for Q3 found that 26% reported their primary gender identity today as male/man, 41% reported as female/woman, 20% reported as part time as one gender, part time as another, and 13% reported as another gender not listed.<sup>22</sup>

The NTDS has become perhaps the most widely cited survey related to the trans population and is considered by many to be the best source of information we have on the trans population at present. Survey respondents reported lower incomes and higher unemployment rates compared to the rates reported by the Bureau of Labor Statistics for the general United States population. Respondents were also more likely to be younger and to be white. Additionally, while a large number of studies have focused on trans individuals who are sex workers, only 11 percent of respondents to the NTSD reported ever having exchanged sex for money. The survey also found that respondent sexual identities varied greatly. Despite the large number of responses and the regional diversity of the responses, we cannot assume that these

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<sup>22</sup> For more information on people who answered with this response option, see Harrison et. al. 2011.

results are representative of the national trans population. In surveys of the United States population at large, we could compare the reported demographics of the survey to known population totals from the Census; however, in this case, there are no known population estimates for trans identified people to use for comparison. Ultimately, while surveys like the NTSD take a large first step in conducting surveys of the trans community, its results are only representative of those who responded to the survey.

The needs of trans people are often not represented on official surveys largely because we do not yet have an accurate way to measure trans identity. Typically, transgender respondents have been identified on surveys with three different approaches – the two question approach, the one question approach, and the response option approach. The two question approach involves determining trans status through two separate questions – one on birth sex and the other on current gender identity (as used by Rosser, et al. 2007). An “inconsistency” between the two answers leads to a classification of the respondent as trans. Although this option is less likely to put off non-transgender respondents, it also suffers a number of drawbacks. It is an indirect way of assessing transgender status and therefore relies on analyst interpretation rather than respondent identification as a trans person. It is also often contested by large survey organizations that do not wish to add an additional question to what are, quite often, already lengthy assessment surveys. The benefits of this question are that it is easier to capture trans respondents who might not want to identify as trans. Note that these are not necessarily people who are hiding their trans status, but rather that they identify as either male or female over identifying as trans.

The two question method is becoming the preferred method as it has shown the best results. The CDC HIV Surveillance System, for example, was able to identify 61% more trans people by using the two question approach versus using another approach. These respondents were likely those who identify as either male or female but not as trans so the two question approach allowed inference about their trans identity even if they do not self-identify as such. The ability to more accurately capture more trans respondents is important because it allows for a more realistic assessment of not only trans numbers but also of the various needs of the trans community.

The single question approach is to simply ask directly if a respondent is trans or not. The Massachusetts Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System (BRFSS) has used the one question approach to determine transgender status since 2007 (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention 2007). The MA BRFSS is a telephone survey that had 11,000 respondents in 2011. The 2011 MA BRFSS question is as follows:

Some people describe themselves as transgender when they experience a different gender identity from their sex at birth. For example, a person born into a male body, but who feels female or lives as a woman.

Do you consider yourself to be transgender?

- 1 Yes
- 2 No
- 7 Don't know/not sure
- 9 Refused

[NOTE: Additional information for interviewer if asked about definition of transgender: Some people describe themselves as transgender when they experience a different gender identity from their sex at birth. For example, a person born into a male body, but who feels female or lives as a woman would be transgendered. Some transgender people change their physical appearance so that it matches their internal gender identity. Some transgender people take hormones and some have surgery. A transgender person may be of any sexual orientation – straight, gay, lesbian, or bisexual.]

- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2011)

The MA BRFSS found a 0.5% transgender prevalence rate. Interestingly, 75% of those respondents identified as straight. Results also showed that there was a lower rate of “don’t know/not sure” answers for the transgender question than for the sexual identity question – 0.6% vs. 1.0% respectively. They also found relatively low refusal rates, with the lowest rates among Hispanics.

The MA BRFSS is currently one of four states that ask about transgender status. It is considered by many to be a step in the right direction but still suffers a number of serious limitations. For example, the interviewer uses voice to determine the sex of the respondents and only asks if they are not sure (at least they are supposed to ask though there is evidence to suggest that embarrassment keeps most interviews from confirming sex). Since sex is a screening mechanism for the survey, in that they look for certain numbers of men and women, it opens the question of how many trans people are being screened out before even getting to the survey. Another limitation of this approach is that there are many individuals who researchers might classify as trans but who do not themselves identify as such. In other words, respondents who are born male and transition to female now consider themselves to be simply female rather than trans.

The response option approach involves adding a trans response option to an existing gender and/or sexual identity measure (as, for example, in research by Conron, Scout, and Austin 2008). This approach has the benefit of not increasing survey burden with additional questions and also not asking respondents if they are transgender in a limited context. The addition of a response option for trans identity, especially when situated amongst other response options, has the benefit of allowing

respondents to select this option within the context of other gender options. The disadvantage, however, similar to that shared with the one question approach, is that trans respondents who do not identify as transgender (but rather as “male” or “female”, for example) will simply not select this option.

A number of issues outside of simply the methodology used to assess trans status must also be solved before an accurate count of trans people can be made. First, sex determination is often not as clear cut as it might seem. The CDC for example has a category of men who have sex with men (MSM) which also includes transwomen (those born male but who now identify as female and may, in fact, have a vagina). This can affect the two question approach and also result in screening issues. As mentioned, BRFSS simply notes respondents’ sex based on interviewer interpretation. NHIS, which is an in person survey, also does not ask sex but rather the interviewer states “I am reporting your sex as....”. For fear of embarrassment the interviewer will sometimes not say this and, on the other side, many respondents would theoretically not correct an interviewer for fear of embarrassment as well. This question also raises the issue of the difference between “sex” and “sex at birth” which need not, and presumably for many transsexual people, do not, coincide.

### *Cognitive Testing of Transgender Status*

There have been limited cognitive interviewing studies directly related to trans status. Even in studies where transgender cognitive data might be gleaned, the survey itself was rarely directed at trans people nor with primary goals of improving this data. One exception to this is a 2008 study by Burke and colleagues that tested the

Transgender HIV Behavioral Survey. Their work examined proposed questions from this survey using a focus group first to help determine appropriate terminology and then conducted 19 cognitive interviews. A limitation of this study is that it was only conducted among racial and ethnic minorities and those who are male-to-female transgender. As their report states, “to be eligible for the study, respondents had to consider themselves as male-to-female transgender persons, meaning that they had to be male and identify, live, or present themselves as women” (Burke et. al. 2008: 2).

As noted before, the QDRL at NCHS recently undertook a cognitive study to help develop the sexual identity question for the NHIS so that it can be implemented on the 2013 version of that survey. Trans people were not a target of this study; however, as 21 trans participants took part, some information can be gleaned from it. A further elaboration of these efforts will provide the basis of my fifth chapter.

Although not directly about transgender per se, Wylie et. al. (2010) undertook a cognitive interviewing study to examine how socially assigned gender nonconformity measure might be used in investigations of health disparities. Their goal was “to develop a measure that is appropriate for use on instruments surveying a diverse population to inform how gender expression is related to health” (p. 264). The advantage of their measure would be that it could be used to assess disparities among individuals who are gender nonconforming, regardless of whether or not they consider themselves trans. The disadvantage is that this is still disputed by many as an indirect or inaccurate way to get at demographics of the trans population.

As mentioned before, a great deal of work remains to be done on the issue of transgender data collection on official surveys. The field is wrought with unique

complications, from concept construction to the shifting identities of those surveyed. This dissertation will contribute to the emerging literature on trans identity measurement on official (and other) surveys. In order to do so, another relevant literature must first be examined – that of trans identity over the life course --- because it can inform our understanding of how that identity might shift and therefore affect what we know, or think we know, about the trans population from survey data.

### Part III: Toward an Understanding of the Socially Constructed Nature of Trans Identity

In order to better understand how trans people identify on official surveys, we must first understand the socially constructed nature of the very concept of trans as well as how trans people identify across the life course. This is important because for many, nay, virtually all trans individuals, their identity shifts across the life course (Bono and Fitzpatrick 2011; Gagne et. al. 1997; Green 2004; Roen 2002) and the socially constructed nature of the terminology used for self-identification is also likely to shift. For example, they might begin life by identifying as a heterosexual male, then as a trans person, then as a trans female, then as a lesbian female. Across the life course, not only might the available response options, as well as their meaning, shift, but also their own sense of self-identity and their reporting of these various identities on official surveys. For this reason, it is important to better understand the socially constructed nature of terms and identities across the trans life course in order to begin to understand how to better measure such identities on official surveys.



## *The Socially Constructed Meanings of Sex and Gender*

At the very base of transgender identities lies the complicated entanglement of sex and gender identities. For that reason, it is important to understand the socially constructed nature of these two phenomena before we will be able to fully understand the social construction of trans identity itself. Gagne, Tewksbury, and McGaughey (1997), assert that “Much of the social scientific focus on transgendered individuals has derived from an interest in understanding “deviation” from the “normal” and “natural” two-sex system. While extremely diversified, this literature is organized around psychiatric and psychological concerns, anthropological examinations of transgenderism, and defining and describing various categories of transgenderists and their cultural manifestations. With the exception of Weinberg, Williams, and Pryor’s (1994) research on transsexual, bisexuals and treatises written by transgendered individuals, the literature on transgenderism has focused primarily on issues of sex and gender. Within this literature, there has been little examination of sexuality and a virtual absence of research on the coming-out experiences<sup>23</sup> of transgendered individuals” (480). As King and Ekins (2007) have noted, “Indeed, the sociological literature on transgenderism is still small” (5037).

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<sup>23</sup> Given the use of the phrase “coming out”, one might expect to see a review of the literature on the coming out process of gays and lesbians. I do not feel that this literature is relevant, however, for a number of reasons. First, I wish to make it very clear that transgender is NOT the same as gay or lesbian. Although some trans people identify as gay or lesbian at some point during their life course, many do not (in fact, some suggest that the *majority* do not). Second, the idea of “coming out” in general is starting to lose sway as it implies that gay people were even ever “in” (that is, that they did not always identify as gay). Third, the types of issues and discrimination faced by trans people, although similar in some ways to that faced by gay and lesbian people, is also highly distinct. Fourth, many trans people do not “come out” as transgender in the same way that gay and lesbian people come out as gay or lesbian. They transition from one sex to another over time. Fifth, and building on the previous point, trans is partially about sexual identity but also very much about gender identity and one would likely not argue that a literature on “coming out” would be relevant to a study of gender.

In order to better understand the trans literature, it is first necessary to understand the difference between “sex” and “gender” because it is just these identity categories that many trans identities challenge and disrupt (Gagne et. al. 1997; King and Ekins 2007). These words have come to be used synonymously by many in academia today though they do not mean the same thing, especially with respect to the trans literature. They are, in fact, social constructions based most heavily on the historical moment and cultural context in which they are being employed.

Barbara Ryan (2007) has noted, “Often confused or used as if the terms were the same, sex and gender are in actuality different designations of human behavior based on physical capabilities and social expectations” (p. 4196). Further, specific meanings of these two terms, specifically that there are only two sexes and that gender is largely a by-product of sex, is also heavily contested (Bem 1993; Fausto-Sterling 2000; Pagliassotti 1993; Wharton 2005).

Erving Goffman (1976) introduced several key ideas to help move beyond a simple sex equals gender ideology. He contributed the idea of “gender role” which he saw as the enactment of socially prescribed gender attitudes and behaviors. He noted that, unlike gender itself, gender role is a situated rather than a master identity. He also introduced the idea of “gender display” which he defines as “if gender be defined as the culturally established correlates of sex (whether in consequence of biology or learning), then gender display refers to conventionalized portrayals of these correlates” (p. 69). The import of this concept is that it focuses on the socially constructed nature of gender rather than assuming it as a biological consequence.

West and Zimmerman (1987) moved beyond Goffman to develop the notion of “doing gender.” According to them, “Doing gender involves a complex of socially guided perceptual, interactional, and micropolitical activities that cast particular pursuits as expressions of masculine and feminine “natures”” (p. 125). They further make key distinctions between sex, sex category, and gender. They see sex as a determination made through the application of socially agreed upon biological criteria for classifying persons as females or males; sex category as placement achieved through application of the sex criteria, but in everyday life, categorization is established and sustained by the socially required identificatory displays that proclaim one’s membership in one or the other category; and gender as the activity of managing situated conduct in light of normative conceptions of attitudes and activities appropriate for one’s sex category. Gender, therefore, is constituted through social interactions and seen as an emergent feature of particular social situations. It is not so much what one *is*, but more fundamentally, what one *does*.

Harold Garfinkel’s (1967) now classic text, *Studies in Ethnomethodology*, was based largely around the case study of a particular transsexual<sup>24</sup> named Agnes. In his work, Garfinkel sought to demonstrate his new method and show how people create, develop, and maintain stable accounts of themselves and social interactions in everyday life. At the same time, and perhaps inadvertently, it helped support a methodology for demonstrating “the continuous nature of the social production of gender” (Armitage 2001) (Bologh 1992; Kessler and McKenna 1978). More concretely, it opened the doors to a more sociological understanding of how mutable

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<sup>24</sup> As noted before, for purposes of this dissertation, transsexuals are included under the umbrella term of “trans” and thus relevant to this literature review.

biological sex can be (a case further developed by Benjamin [1966] in his work *The Transsexual Phenomenon*) and how socially dependent gender actually is.

Kessler and McKenna (2006/1978) also take an ethnomethodological approach to explaining the social construction of gender. They argue that gender, like reality, is produced and reproduced through daily interactions with others rather than existing as some natural quality of the social world. This sense of gender being socially constructed, however, leaves them with the optimistic conclusion that,

“all knowledge is now grounded in the everyday social construction of a world of two genders where gender attribution, rather than “gender” differentiation, is what concerns those who fear change. With the courage to confront, understand, and redefine our incorrigible propositions, we can begin to discover new scientific knowledge and to construct new realities in everyday life” (181).

Hegemonic understandings of sex and gender are heavily questioned by Jean Stockard and Miriam Johnson (1992), in *Sex and Gender in Society*. They acknowledge that there are strong biological influences in the uterus that can affect physical sex development. They also acknowledge sex differences in chromosomal structure, although they point out that the chromosomes only influence the development of gonads that then secrete hormones that direct the appearance (or not) of secondary sex characteristics. They note that “is it a boy or is it a girl?” is generally the first question asked when a baby is born and that “the answer will profoundly affect the child’s future” (p. 3). These sex “differences”, however, are given power largely through their presumed link to gender. As they note, “many scholars now

prefer to talk about gender inequality and development rather than sex inequality and development, to emphasize the social, rather than biological, basis of most distinctions between males and females” (p. xi). In the end, therefore, they claim that learning, not biology, is paramount to establishing difference.

Some postmodernists assert that the distinction between sex and gender is a false one. They claim that bodies are cultural constructs constituted by a given discourse. As Butler (1990: 7) has argued, if “‘sex’ is as culturally constructed as gender, perhaps it was always already gender, with the consequence that the distinction between sex and gender turns out to be no distinction at all”. These theorists often cite transsexuals as evidence of their claims arguing that they are proof that sex is malleable and therefore its “certainty” is really just a sociopolitical construction.

Not all who take aim at the argument of a sex/gender distinction go to the extremes of the postmodernists. They argue for the importance of conceiving as gender as a bodied experience as well as one socially constructed through discourse. Thus, although they take aim at the distinctionist framework, they argue for the importance of understanding gender as an embodied experience (Moi 1999). Schrock (2005), for example, shows how transsexuals are particularly dependent on their material bodies as means of enabling, as well as limiting, how they are culturally perceived. He links the material changes undertaken by many transsexuals as linked to role-taking, self-monitoring, feelings of authenticity and pride, and practical consciousness to show how the embodied experience of gender is related to subjectivity.

The overlap of sex and gender is often seen as a particularly Western construct (Ryan 2007; Spade and Valentine 2008) and one that is not, therefore, universal in all societal and geographic contexts. O'Brien (1999) has noted that those in the United States tend to overemphasize biology and underestimate socialization and relationship to explain sex and gender. This emphasis on binary gender-flows-from-sex thinking is often referred to as "the pink and blue syndrome" (Spade and Valentine 2008). As Glick and Fiske (1999) have pointed out, "we typically categorize people by sex effortlessly, even nonconsciously, with diverse and profound effects on social interactions" (p. 368).

The overlap of sex and gender is a social construct and, therefore, far from a cultural universal (Herdt 1994). Perhaps the most famous example of a "third gender" is that of the berdache, a concept, and more importantly, a social role found among many original peoples of North America (Blackwood 1984; Blumenfeld and Raymond 1988; Bonvillain 1998; Callender and Kochems 1983; Nanda 2000). What is most notable about the berdache is that they were not defined by their biological sex – they could, in fact, possess either a penis or a vagina – but rather by their social role. And while many of the peoples among whom the berdache were found did indeed adhere, though not always very strictly, to prescribed social gender roles (which was itself less damaging as there was a general concept of gender equality [Bonvillain 1998]), they did have at least three distinct such roles<sup>25</sup>.

The berdache are not the only example of a culture with varying conceptions of sex and gender. Serena Nanda (1990; 2000) has noted the case of the hijra in India

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<sup>25</sup> See Towle and Morgan (2006) for a critique of the use of the concept of "third gender" in U.S. scholarship.

as an example of an often, though not always, exalted third gender. The hijra are often employed to perform at births and weddings and are seen by many as spiritual leaders (although as India becomes increasingly westernized, the hijras are becoming increasingly demonized). Other studies of differing sex and gender conceptions include that of woman-woman marriage in Kenya by Njambi and O'Brien (2000), father infant nursing by Hewlett (2001), female hunters among the Agta Negritos by Estioko-Griffin and Griffin (2001), and alternative gender expressions in Thailand by Jackson and Sullivan (1999). These examples help to highlight how what are often deemed as immutable facts of biology or social law are, in fact, continually evolving social constructs heavily dependent on a historical moment, geographic location, and cultural context in order to give them meaning.

The trans challenge to existing hegemonic notions of sex and gender leaves little doubt that these notions are flawed not only theoretically, but empirically as well. Notions of two and only two sexes and the idea that gender is a natural extension of sex are woefully out of touch with the lives of many trans and non-trans people alike. This disruption opens the space for an extended understanding of these concepts – one that includes not just two categories, but perhaps three, or four, or forty. This understanding of sex and gender as social constructs now sets the stage for better understand trans itself as a social construct.

### *The Social Construction of Transgenderism*

An understanding of trans as theory helps further the understanding of trans as a social construction and deconstructs the hegemonic sex/gender dichotomy that has

come to dominate many contemporary Western societies by presenting a challenge to the duality of each and of their implied linkage to each other. Philosophical challenges to the duality of sex and gender underscore the need to deconstruct the binary notions at their base in order to reveal the socially constructed nature of each as well as the lived complexity of those who transgress their boundaries (Gilbert 2000).

Perhaps one of the most famous, and controversial, gender theorists is Kate Bornstein. Born Al, Kate is a self-described “gender outlaw” (1995) and “gender terrorist” who seeks to undo what she feels is the oppressive binary of understandings of gender. Kate’s own life course presents an interesting challenge to the step-like imagining of transgender life course. That is, her own life history does not present a clear gender trajectory, but rather a back-and-forth and back again path of gender transition, play, and acceptance. Born a man, and later having sex reassignment surgery, Bornstein spent some time heavily involved with the lesbian community in San Francisco. She had a lesbian lover who later discovered he was a gay man. She has been male, female, transgender, and every shade of the gender spectrum in between. The complexity of Bornstein’s self-identified gender terrorism is both a reaffirmation of transness as well as a challenge to its simplicity. That is, if trans challenges us to explode the binary notions of sex and gender then Bornstein challenges us to explode the concept of gender altogether.

In *My Gender Workbook* (1998), Bornstein makes a convincing case that there is nothing natural in being a “real man” or a “real woman.” Through witty and thought-provoking arguments, such as the “gender aptitude test,” Bornstein



convincingly argues that there is nothing natural about our gender. In a particularly powerful point, Bornstein argues against the case that gender represents a “real me” by asking “Why, I wonder, would we need to learn to be that [“the real me”], unless there was so much pressure coming from the rest of the world, making us not be ‘the real me’” (p. 48). She notes that there is no codified set of rules on how to be a man or a woman and asks “Why do we mystify these categories to such a degree that we assume “everybody knows” what real men and real women are?” (p. 46). Ironically, Bornstein’s goal seems to be to mystify these categories even further, though not in an effort to reify their existence but rather as a means to challenge their hegemonic legitimacy.

Judith Halberstam (1999), in a clearly socially constructionist mode, calls for “new sexual vocabularies that acknowledge sexualities and genders as styles rather than life-styles, as fictions rather than facts of life, and as potentialities rather than as fixed identities” (p. 125). Halberstam claims that we are all, in a sense, transsexuals:

We are all transsexuals except that the referent of the trans becomes less and less clear (and more and more queer). We are all cross-dressers but where are we crossing from and to what? There is no ‘other’ side, no ‘opposite’ sex, no natural divide to be spanned by surgery, by disguise, by passing. We all pass or we don’t, we all wear our drag, and we all derive a different degree of pleasure – sexual or otherwise – from our costumes. It is just that for some of us our costumes are made of fabric or material, while for others they are

made of skin; for some an outfit can be changed; for others skin must be re sewn. There are no transsexuals. (Halberstam 1999: 126-27)

Throughout her work, Halberstam claims both that we are all transsexuals and also that there are no transsexuals. This paradox is possible as identities become exploded into infinite variations and hegemonic ideals become both simultaneously unattainable and attainable by everyone.

The breakdown of genders and sexualities into identities is in many ways, therefore, an endless project, and it is perhaps preferable therefore to acknowledge that gender is defined by its transitivity, that sexuality manifests as multiple sexualities, and that therefore we are all transsexuals. There are no transsexuals. (Halberstam 1999: 132)

David Valentine (2007), in his book *Imagining Transgender*, takes up questions of how the category of transgender has been socially constructed, the various meanings it has come to take on, as well as the effects of the institutionalization of the category itself, since the early 1990s. Through ethnographic research done in New York City in the late 1990s with primarily male-to-female transgender identified people, Valentine shows how the category of transgender has been a central site where underlying meanings of gender and sexuality are being worked out. He examines “in what ways does transgender not only *explain* non-normative genders but also *produce the effect* of those differences by effacing others? It is this complex social and political process that I refer to as “imagining transgender”” (ital. in original) (14-15). Drawing on a sociology of knowledge, he

claims that his work “is therefore a call to think about gender and sexuality as political formations” (19).

Valentine claims that modern conceptions of homosexuality and transgender are possible only because of claims that gender and sexuality are different phenomenon and that transgender, in effect, has the power “to generate and maintain a particular theorization of gender and sexuality as distinct categories of human experience” (145). Similar to Meyerowitz’s (2002) idea of a “taxonomic revolution (169), Valentine (2007) claims that “transgender has arisen out of a realignment – contested as it may be – of the kinds of individuals who see themselves or are seen as being part of the collectivity, and who were previously accounted for by other terms including “homosexuality,” “transexuality,” and “transvestism” (37). He goes on to say that transgender as a category has served the function, in many ways, to “absorb the gender transgression which has doggedly been associated with modern (and especially male) homosexual identities” and therefore “*is also an effect of the historical development of privatized homosexual identity*” (ital. in original) (64).

A review of the theoretical literature surrounding trans issues provides us with a deeper understanding of the philosophical roots at the base of contemporary hegemonic understandings of sex and gender. At the same time, it challenges not just the notion of a dichotomous sex/gender system, but the very ideas of sex and gender themselves. It provides a theoretical base for beginning to understand trans issues and the challenges they present to any attempt to neatly categorize this theoretically explosive concept.

*Trans as a Socio-Historical Legal Construct: Lessons from Race*

The category of trans is a social construction, and one dependent on context, the historical moment, and the legal structure. As noted above, the construction of trans as a social category is rooted in concepts of sex and gender which are themselves social constructions, and ones that are highly dependent upon the historical, geographic, and legal context in which they are situated.

The meaning of the term transgender itself has shifted in recent decades demonstrating the importance of the historical moment to conceptual definition. In the 1970s, it was a term used to refer to those who “crossed” from one gender to another. During the 1980s, the term came to include a broader range of gender non-conforming identities. Since the 1990s, the term has taken on a more political connotation as the transgender community has begun advocating for more political rights. These shifting definitions have meant that the social understanding of who is (and who is not) trans has also changed.

One of the benefits of studying the trans population at this particular historical moment is that their measurement has become one of the “hot” new issues. As rights for other sexual minorities continue to advance, increasing attention is being given to the trans community. This is also fueled, in part, by the increasing appearance of gender non-conforming people and issues in popular culture (e.g. Dennis Rodman, Chaz Bono, TransAmerica, RuPaul, Adam Lambert, Lady Gaga). Directives to more accurately measure the trans population have appeared as sub-objectives for Healthy People 2020 and have been given political attention on multiple occasions by United

States Secretary of Health and Human Services Kathleen Sebelius. For these reasons, it is an opportune time to be studying this issue.

The evolution of the race question on the U.S. Census was fueled heavily by political pressure to include new, and better defined, categories. This push has, in turn, helped to highlight the artificial nature of the construction of race and its basis in social factors (Petersen 1997). One difference, nay advantage, of measuring trans identity, is that unlike race there is no history from which to evolve per se. That is, issues of question continuity and histories of political counts will not weigh down the process for developing a “good” measurement in the way that they have slowed the ability of the race question to adapt to the times.

A unique challenge of counting the trans population is that as a category it can encompass sex, gender, and/or sexual identity. Some consider trans to be most appropriately included as a sex category while others see it as a gender category and still others view it as a sexual identity. *Where* to assess trans identity, therefore, is just as important for many as *how* to assess it.

Counting the trans population has many similarities to and differences from counting other populations. Like many other socially constructed categories, counting trans people faces the dilemma of a continually shifting social definition. The definition of race, for example, has shifted over time from one rooted primarily in biological differences to one of social categorization lacking a unified, coherent meaning (Hollinger 1995; Nagel 1994; Omi and Winant 1994). As noted, the social definition of who counts (and who does not count) as trans has shifted in both composition and intent over the last several decades. Similar to race, the boundaries

between categories are becoming less discrete and more difficult to place into a survey box.

The concept of trans also shares another important similarity to that of other socially constructed categories – its definition is heavily dependent on who is doing the defining and for what purposes. An academic researcher wanting to understand the development of trans identity, a government survey designer wanting to include questions or response options related to trans identity, someone applying for a new drivers license, a lay person who just moved in next to a trans individual, and a member of the trans population creating a new social networking site for political advocacy are all likely to use different criteria for understanding what it means to be trans. In this way, concepts are also subject to institutional contexts that are likely to shape their social definition.

Similar to problems faced with questions of race, questions involving trans leave many respondents with response options that they do not feel properly reflect their true identities, especially if they do not meet stereotypical expectations of said categories. Like many of minority races, members of minority sexual and gender categories might attempt to “pass” as the mainstream identity (Forbes 1990; Myrdal 1964). Thus, some sexual minorities, a categorization particularly difficult to “prove”, are prone to select mainstream identities.

Another social constructionist argument relates to the scope of categories. For example, when offered choices about racial identities, many members of non-majority races (e.g. American Indians) have selected “other” categories (Harrison and Bennett 1995), when they do not feel that any of the response categories properly reflect their

identities. This is also a phenomenon we will also see happening with trans respondents (see chapter V). Since “other” responses are often excluded from survey analysis, or are treated as missing data, this is a particular problem when trying to accurately assess certain minority populations.

Building from the above, a social constructionist argument also takes account of the shifting meanings of terminology and their varied meanings between in-group and out-group members. Espiritu (1992), for example, notes how the 1990 Census listed 10 different Asian nationalities, each as a separate race, because it was feared that many Asian Americans would not select the overarching category of “Asian”. This concern will be explored as it relates to trans self-identification on surveys to explore if, and how, this issue might also apply.

Another similarity between questions involving race, and those involving sexual minorities, especially trans identities, is that the population of many of the response categories is often a very small percentage of the overall count. Native Americans, for example, make up a relatively small percentage of the population yet are important to be included as a response category for race questions. The same argument could be made of a trans identity – although it is a relatively small percentage of the overall population, its inclusion is still important on survey instruments.

Counting the trans population also shares a particular similarity to counting other categories of sexual minorities in that one does not typically identify as a member of said category across their entire life course. In other words, one does not typically identify as a member of the gay or lesbian or trans community from birth in

the same way that one might identify as a member of a particular sex or racial category across the life course (recognizing, of course, that these categories can also change across the life course). Instead, there is typically a “coming out” or similar process of self-realization that occurs. This means that knowing when and under what circumstances one might self-identity as a member of this community becomes particularly important. Hirschman et. al. (2000) made the following observation:

In theory, consistent measurement of variations in the makeup of the population requires a clear conceptualization of the differences between segments of the population, and calls for relatively simple means of observing the relevant criteria for assigning individuals to distinct and exhaustive categories. In practice, problems are present in measuring every characteristic, including the simplest, such as age, place of residence, and household relationship. For most census questions, the demographic and social characteristics are regarded as objective phenomena that are knowable if appropriate tools of measurement are designed. The question of race is different, however, because it includes an inherently subjective component. (Hirschman et. al. 2000: 390)

Although speaking of race, the point made here could easily be applied to measures of gender and sexual identity as well. I quote this passage at length because I believe that it gets to the real heart of the complication of measuring trans identity – it is highly subjective. There are few objective indicators to tell us if someone is “white” or “black,” just as there are few objective indicators to tell us if someone is gay,



female, or trans<sup>26</sup>. As the above authors go on to conclude, “Now a person’s race is simply whatever he or she (or another household member) says it is.....Beyond self-identity, however, there is almost no basis for the validity of measuring race” (Lieberson 1990: 390).

The above arguments point to how studying trans measurement on surveys is both a new form of an old issue as well as a unique dilemma facing survey researchers and those interested in data on this particular population. We can draw on the challenges and lessons learned from other socially constructed categories (race, sex, gender, etc.) to launch from a strong starting point in order to study the unique challenges in measuring sexual minority and trans identity. The contribution of this dissertation, therefore, is that it presents one way to address the unique challenges faced in sexual minority and trans identity measurement on surveys by utilizing a life course perspective and qualitative interviewing data to help improve ways to assess these identities and therefore to better understand marginalized populations.

### *The Life Course Perspective*

In order to explore how trans identities might shift across the life course, and the impact this might have on how identity is expressed on official surveys, it is necessary to better understand the basic fundamentals of life course theory. Jens Zinn (2007) defines life course as “the idea that the course of one’s life is not just determined by a natural process of aging but is mainly shaped by social institutions and sociocultural values as well as by decisions and unexpected events” (pp. 2630-

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<sup>26</sup> There is some agreement that particular physical features (i.e. skin color, hair texture, eye shape), or a combination of certain physical features, are used by a society to include someone as belonging to a certain category (i.e. Black, Asian, etc.), but these categories themselves are socially constructed.

31). Glen Elder (2007) states that, “As a concept, the life course refers to the age-graded, sequence of events and social roles that is embedded in social structures and history” (p. 2634). Mortimer and Shanahan (2003) have further noted that, “As a paradigm, the life course refers to an imaginative framework comprised of a set of interrelated presuppositions, concepts, and methods that are used to study these age-graded, socially embedded roles” (p. xi). This paradigm can be used as a theoretical guideline to help determine appropriate interview questions to better get at how the identity of trans individuals might change over the life course.

At least three concepts central to the life course perspective will prove useful in better understanding trans identity across the life course – trajectories, transitions, and turning points. Trajectories are “sequences of roles and experiences, [that] are themselves made up of *transitions*, or changes in state or role” (italics in original) (Elder 2003: 8). Turning points are those moments or events that “involve a substantial change in the direction of one’s life, whether subjective or objective” (p. 8). Applied to the life course of a trans individuals we might imagine being male, female, or transgender as a trajectory, the period of taking hormones as a transition, and the day of having sex-reassignment surgery as a turning point, for example.

A better understanding of the life course perspective brought to bear on the understanding gained from a review of the trans literature, will now enable the formulation of a research question related to trans identity across the life course.

### *Establishing a Research Question from the Literature*

An understanding of how trans can be simultaneously a sex identity, a gender identity, and a sexual identity will prove useful in disentangling what many non-trans individuals see as a distinct phenomena. An understanding of how trans is both a distinct phenomena and also embedded in more universal, albeit constructed, phenomena – those of sex, gender, and sexuality – will prove useful in making better sense of what we (think we) know about those phenomena. And understanding trans as a biographical phenomena will help ground an analysis of interviews with trans individuals about their potentially shifting identities across the life course.

The question of trans identity, like that of sexual identity, is itself a complicated question. Although we already have research indicating that trans people do not always identify as such on official surveys (Burke et. al. 2008; Conron et. al. 2008), more work needs to be done to know at what points in their life course trans people identify in what ways. A change in how one identifies is, according to the theoretical and autobiographical literature, a process rather than an instantaneous transition. In terms of official surveys, however, the change is more like the latter – a question of placing oneself in a particular box. That is, surveys provide only discreet mechanisms by which to classify one's identity and thus provide limited options for how one can self-identity as a response option. Survey measurement, therefore, provides a particularly interesting way to measure pivotal moments in identity transition and an understanding of one will no doubt help to inform an understanding of the other.

A social constructionist as well as the life course perspective both help to establish a theoretical framework through which a research agenda can be planned and an interview protocol can be established. When brought to bear on the trans literature, it will prove a useful way to ground the data obtained from interviews in a way that will make them useful in understanding how trans identity can be better measured on official surveys because they help us make better sense of the ways in which the identity of trans people might shift across the life course. In other words, to understand how the trajectory, transitions, and turning points of the life course might impact self reporting of a trans identity on official surveys.

This dissertation will bring a social constructionist as well as a life course perspective to bear on the various strands of trans literature in order to address my third research question - *How can we understand the trans life course in a way that will enable us to make better sense of existing data on trans people from official surveys?* This, in turn, will enable us to better understand how changes in identity over the life course of a trans person affect self-identity on official surveys. This knowledge will help us not only to make sense of existing data but also to create better, and more appropriate, questions and response options for future survey work. This knowledge will then provide us with a better picture of the trans community, its needs, and how we might be better able to address those needs.

### Chapter III: Methods and Data Analysis

Data to address the first two research questions, and to be analyzed for chapters IV and V will be drawn from data already collected for a project conducted by the Questionnaire Design Research Laboratory (QDRL) at the National Center for Health Statistics (NCHS). Details of this project are outlined below. Thus, secondary data analysis will be the primary method used in these chapters. Data for chapter VI will be original data drawn from interviews to be conducted with trans identified people.

#### Data for Chapter IV: Improving Sexual Identity Measurement on Official Surveys

Chapter IV will describe research to develop and evaluate a sexual identity question for the National Health Interview Survey (NHIS). Development and then evaluation of the question is based on findings from cognitive testing studies conducted by the QDRL, specifically, seven previous testing projects as well as this current study which, taken together, consisted of a total of 386 in-depth cognitive interviews.<sup>27</sup> Additionally, data from the 2002 and 2006 National Survey of Family Growth (NSFG) were examined to further investigate findings from past cognitive interviewing studies.

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<sup>27</sup> For final reports of previous projects, see Q-Bank at <http://wwwn.cdc.gov/QBANK/Home.aspx>.

The method used to examine the performance of the newly revised sexual identity question was cognitive interviewing. Perhaps the best way to better understand the information actually being collected by a given survey question is through cognitive interviewing. Cognitive interviewing is a qualitative method based on grounded theory whereby researchers are able to better understand the interpretive processes of respondents. That is, rather than assume that respondents understand a given question in the ways in which the author of a survey intended, it uncovers the interpretive patterns of how respondents *actually* understand the question. For this reason, it is arguably the best way to get at what data is actually being collected by a given question.

As described in the literature review, cognitive interviewing is the primary method used by the federal statistical community to ensure data quality (Miller 2011). It is also one of the best methods to provide insight into question validity, that is, insight into the phenomena that a question actually captures—the substance that makes the statistic. The aim of cognitive interviewing is to investigate how survey questions perform when asked of respondents, specifically, how respondents understand a question and how they go about forming an answer. Cognitive interviewing is a qualitative method that provides rich, contextual information regarding the ways respondents 1) interpret a question, 2) consider and weigh out relevant aspects of their lives and, finally, 3) formulate a response based on that consideration. As such, cognitive interviewing provides in-depth understanding of the ways in which a question operates, the kind of phenomena that it captures, and whether or not it ultimately serves the scientific goal. Findings from a cognitive

interviewing project typically lead to recommendations for improving a survey question, or results can be used in post-survey analysis to assist in data interpretation.

There are a number of advantages and disadvantages to the cognitive interviewing technique. Some of the advantages include improving the reliability and validity of surveys, reducing response error in surveys and improving data quality, ensuring that particular questions and surveys meet their intended objectives, and improving the interpretation and analysis of survey results. Some of the disadvantages include that there is a lack of shared agreement among cognitive interviews about best practices, there is debate about the proper sample size needed (see, for example Guest, Bunce, and Johnson 2006; Blair and Conrad 2011), there are few guidelines available on how to analyze the data, and problems might be artificially created in the context of the cognitive interview that would not have otherwise arise in the field (Campbell 2012). Recent developments in the field have started making significant strides in capitalizing on some of these advantages and finding ways to either mitigate or largely resolve some of the disadvantages (Miller 2011).

### *Sampling and Recruitment*

Table 3.1 presents respondent demographics for the study. An attempt was made to capture a broad range of respondents but particular emphasis was placed on recruiting gay and lesbian respondents as well as a range of those reporting ‘something else,’ specifically, those who identify as transgender, queer or who are still in the process of figuring out their sexuality. This was achieved by recruiting

respondents through two gay and lesbian community centers as well as by word of mouth recruitment.

**Table 3.1** Respondent Demographics for Sexual Identity Question

<b>Interviews Completed:</b>	<b>139</b>	
	<b>Count</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
<b>Gender</b>		
Male	65	46.8%
Female	66	47.5%
More Complicated	8	5.8%
<b>Sexual Identity</b>		
Straight, that is, not gay	86	61.9%
Gay or Lesbian	24	17.3%
Bisexual	9	6.5%
Something Else	19	13.7%
<b>Education</b>		
Less than HS degree	23	16.5%
High School Degree/GED	38	27.3%
Some college, no degree	22	15.8%
Associates Degree	17	12.2%
Bachelors	21	15.1%
Graduate School	17	12.2%
<b>Race</b>		
White	32	23.0%
Black	62	44.6%
Indian American	7	5.0%
Asian	4	2.9%
Other	18	12.9%
Latino	49	35.3%
<b>Language</b>		
English	94	67.6%
Spanish	45	32.4%
<b>Age</b>		
Under 25	21	15.1%
26-40	45	32.4%
41-60	48	34.5%
Over 60	16	11.5%



English speaking recruitment for this project was handled by a recruitment professional at the National Center for Health Statistics (NCHS) and Spanish speaking recruitment was handled by myself in the capacity of an employee of NCHS. English speaking respondents were recruited through the QDRL database, newspaper advertising, flyers and by word-of-mouth. Spanish speaking respondents were recruited through flyers, by word-of-mouth, and with the assistance of several non-profit organizations catering to the Latino community.

It should be noted that all recruitment took place in the Washington D.C. metropolitan area and that this geographic limitation might affect generalizability to the national population. This is particularly true for the Spanish version of the question as there is not just one “Spanish” spoken in the United States. Mexicans, for example, speak a different type of Spanish with different terminology, slang, and cultural connotations than, say, Argentinians, Peruvians, or Dominicans. The Washington D.C. metropolitan area has a predominance of Salvadoreans, for example, that might have influenced the interpretation of the Spanish version of the question.

To test the newly revised question on sexual identity, the QDRL conducted 139 cognitive interviews: 94 in English and 45 in Spanish. The newly tested question is shown below:

**English: Do you think of yourself as:**

[For men: ] Gay

[For women:] Lesbian or gay

[For men: ] Straight, that is, not gay  
lesbian

[For women:] Straight, that is, not

or gay

Bisexual

Something Else (*Go to A*)

Don't Know (*Go to B*)

**Spanish: Usted piensa en sí mismo como...**

[For men:] Gay

[For women:] Lesbiana o gay

[For men:] Heterosexual, o sea no gay [For women:] Heterosexual, o sea no lesbiana o gay

Bisexual

Otra cosa (*Go to A*)

No sabe (*Go to B*)

**A. English: [If 'something else' is selected] By something else, do you mean that...**

You are not straight, but identify with another label such as queer, trisexual, omnisexual or pan-sexual

You are transgender, transsexual or gender variant

You have not figured out your sexuality or are in the process of figuring it out

You do not think of yourself as having sexuality

You do not use labels to identify yourself

You made a mistake and did not mean to pick this answer

You mean something else (*Go to C*)

**Spanish: Cuando dice Otra Cosa, quiere decir que...**

Usted es gay o lesbiana, pero se identifica más con otras clasificaciones como queer, multisexual, o trisexual

Usted es transgénero o transexual

Usted no sabe o está en el proceso de descubrir su sexualidad

Usted no piensa en sí mismo como teniendo una sexualidad

Rechaza personalmente todas las etiquetas para describir a su persona

Usted se equivocó y no quiso escoger esta respuesta

Usted quiere decir otra cosa [*Go to 6c*]

**B. English: You did not enter an answer for the question. That is because you:**

You don't understand the words

You understand the words, but you have not figured out your sexuality or are in the process of figuring it out

You mean something else

**Spanish: Cuando dice No Sabe, quiere decir que...**

Usted no entiende las palabras

Usted entiende las palabras, pero no sabe o está en el proceso de descubrir su sexualidad

Quiere decir otra cosa

**C. English: [If 'you mean something else' is selected]**

What do you mean by something else? Please type in your answer

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**Spanish: ¿Que quiere decir por otra cosa?**

Por favor escriba su respuesta:

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These interviews were conducted on-site at the QDRL interview lab in Hyattsville, Maryland as well as at several off-site locations including The DC Center for the LGBT Community, Mpoderate (a center for Latino gay male and transgender youth), Casa de Maryland, and a rented office building located in the Colombia Heights neighborhood of Washington, D.C.

Interviewing for the project continued until theoretical saturation was reached, that is interviewing was continued until no new patterns of interpretation were detected. The number of interviews required to achieve saturation can vary greatly; however a recent empirical study has found that saturation was achieved in as few as 12 interviews (Guest et al. 2006). For this project, a total of 139 cognitive interviews were conducted before researchers felt confident that saturation had been reached.

*Interviewing Procedures*

Respondents were scheduled for specific interview times (with the exception of a few “drop-ins”) and reported to a set location for their interview. Interviews lasted between 30 and 90 minutes with the typical interview lasting from 45-60 minutes. All interviews were audio recorded using both a cassette recorder as well as a sound recording program on the computer. Respondents were asked to check an anonymous consent form before the interview began and were also asked to give their oral consent once the taping began. At the conclusion of the interview, all respondents were given \$50 as remuneration.

Unlike other QDRL interviewing projects, the questionnaire for this project was administered using an audio-computer assisted self-interview (ACASI) system. (Although not relevant to the findings of this dissertation, the ACASI system was also being tested as one piece of this overall project). ACASI has been shown to improve data quality in potentially sensitive questions such as sexual identity (Tourangeau and Smith 1996). Respondents were asked to answer 8 to 10 demographic questions using the ACASI system and without any assistance from the interviewer. Since questions were asked using an ACASI format, respondents did not see sub-options for primary response options unless they selected that particular option. In other words, they would not see the options shown under “A” above unless they had selected “Something Else” as their response to the first question. At the conclusion, respondents were asked each item and were then asked to explain their answer. Typical follow-up questions included, “How so?” and “Why do you say that?” If a respondent’s answer seemed vague or unclear, the interviewer asked: “Can you give an example to describe what you are talking about?” Specifically for the sexual identity question, respondents were also asked how they typically referred to themselves and were also asked about other words (i.e. ‘heterosexual’ and ‘homosexual’) that were not appearing in the question. Since probing was conducted at the end of the interview, it is possible that a respondents’ rationale for answering a certain question was affected by their response to previous questions. The culminating text from the interview related how respondents understood or interpreted each question and also outlined the types of experiences and behaviors respondents considered in providing an answer.

## Data for Chapter V: Improving Trans Identity Measurement on Official Surveys

Data for the trans analysis comes from the same project as noted above. Of the 139 interviews conducted for that project, 21 were conducted with respondents who were transgender, transsexual, or genderqueer. These respondents were identified in three principle ways – 1) a response of “trans” to either the gender or the sexual identity question on the questionnaire being tested, 2) an explanation during the cognitive interview that although they did not choose “trans” as a response option, they would have a) at a previous point in their life, or b) if they had known it was an option (it was listed as a sub-option), and 3) recruitment through a transgender listserv.

Although there is some debate as to the sample size necessary to obtain valid results from a cognitive interviewing study (Guest, Bunce, and Johnson 2006; Blair and Conrad 2011), I do not believe the sample size to be a serious limitation of the study. The goal of cognitive interviewing is to saturate patterns of interpretation, not to make generalizable population estimates, and I believe this sample of 21 trans respondents will achieve that goal.

The respondents in this study reflect a wide range of backgrounds. Eleven interviews were conducted in English, while 10 were conducted in Spanish. Two respondents had an elementary school education, two had attended high school but did not get their diploma, four respondents had a high school diploma or GED, three had an Associate’s Degree, five had a Bachelor’s Degree, and one had a Master’s Degree. Respondents ranged in age between 21 and 51 years old, with the majority of respondents being in their thirties. Additionally, six respondents identified as

White, four identified as Black or African-American, three respondents identified as multiracial, and the remainder identified as “some other race” (this occurred primarily with Spanish speaking respondents as Hispanic and Latino were listed as ethnicities, not races, on the tested questionnaire).

#### Data for Chapter VI: Toward an Understanding of the Trans Life Course

The beginning point for data collection for the chapter on trans life course was from the 21 cognitive interviews done with trans individuals from the previous chapter. As a part of many of those cognitive interviews, trans people in particular were asked about their shifting identity across the life course. Although this data did not serve as the bulk of the data drawn upon for this chapter, it did serve as a starting point for the in-depth interviews, particularly in developing the interview guide.

The primary data for chapter six on the sociological aspects of the trans life course that relate to how trans people identify as official surveys was drawn from a series of new interviews conducted with trans individuals. I believe interviewing to be the most appropriate method to get at my research question because, as Weiss (1995) has noted, “qualitative interview studies can provide preparation for quantitative studies” (p. 11). I conducted 10 in-depth interviews with trans individuals to explore how their gender non-conforming identity developed and changed over their life course. The goal of the interviews, as suggested by Fontana (2007), will be, “not just asking questions, but being able to get answers – meaningful answers” (2411).

Respondents were recruited via an announcement on a trans listserv and facebook page, an e-mail distribution list, a posting, and word-of-mouth. The announcement read as follows:

I am looking for individuals who either presently, or at one time, have identified under the broad umbrella term of transgender to conduct one hour interviews on their life course history. The goal of these interviews is to inform my dissertation research on how to better understand survey response data related to the trans community. I am particularly interested in how potential identity shifts across the life course might impact how someone self-identifies on an official survey. Interviews will aim to get at the life history of the respondent, particularly as it relates to the history of their trans identification. Interviews will last approximately one hour and will be completely anonymous. If you, or someone you know, might be interested in participating, please feel free to send me an e-mail at [jryan2@umd.edu](mailto:jryan2@umd.edu). I would be happy to answer any and all questions. Any help would be greatly appreciated!

All respondents identified themselves in some way as gender non-conforming even if they did not identify as trans per se. All interviews were conducted in English in private locations and took place in either a large metropolitan area in the West or one on the east coast. More specific demographics of the respondents will be discussed in Chapter VI.

It is important to enter an interview with a clear objective in mind as well as an established understanding of the ethical considerations of conducting interviews. To these ends, I used sample “clauses” drafted by Weiss (1995: 65) for an interviewer-interviewee contract as my guide. The clauses suggested by Weiss are as follows:

1. The interviewer and the respondent will work together to produce information useful to the research project.
2. The interviewer will define the areas for exploration and will monitor the quality of the material. The respondent will provide

observations, external and internal, accepting the interviewer's guidance regarding topics and the kind of report that is needed.

3. The interviewer will not ask questions out of idle curiosity. On the other hand, the interviewer will be a privileged inquirer in the sense that the interviewer may ask for information the respondent would not make generally available, maybe would not tell anyone else at all.
4. The interviewer will respect the respondent's integrity. This means that the interviewer will not question the respondent's appraisals, choices, motives, right to observations, or personal worth.
5. The interviewer will ensure, both during the interview and afterward, that the respondent will not be damaged or disadvantaged because of the respondent's participation in the interview. In particular, the interviewer will treat the respondent's participation and communications as confidential information.

(Weiss 1995: 65)

These clauses help to set the ethical and practical standards for all interviews.

Interviews lasted 45-120 minutes and respondents did not receive financial compensation for their time. All interviews were conducted during the fall of 2012 and took place in a private location. Interviews were audio recorded but confidentiality will be protected as only I will have access to either interview transcripts or the audio recordings. A selection of interview questions is included in Appendix C, although the interviews were conducted as open-ended, semi-structured,



guided “conversations” rather than as formal closed-ended question-response interviews. This open-ended approach allowed for greater breadth in the answers given by respondents (Fontana 2007).

### Data Analysis

Data from the interviews was analyzed using qualitative techniques, specifically, the constant comparative method (Lincoln and Guba, 1985; Strauss and Corbin, 1990; Creswell, 1998; Ridolfo and Schoua-Glusberg 2011). The constant comparative method is an inductive method of analysis that relies upon systematic coding of interview responses along with analysis of the interview data to develop theories. I used Q-Notes, an analysis software tool developed by NCHS to analyze the data. As data was entered into the Q-Notes software, patterns of question interpretation and cognitive processing problems were identified. Some analyses, specifically assessment of question performance and identification of problems, were already conducted simultaneously with interviews. This iterative process allowed for the question to be improved should any problems have arisen.

Intensive analyses was conducted so as to more systematically identify patterns of interpretation. The first step of data analysis involved reviewing the data and identifying the analytic themes as well as the thematic categories that make up each theme. For example, the theme of ‘respondents’ interpretations of heterosexual’ was identified as an important analytic theme, and the categories linked to this theme reflected all of the different ways in which respondents conceptualized the term

‘heterosexual.’ Next, each interview was coded to reflect the particular interpretation. New categories were created as new interpretative patterns were discovered.

In order to specify the dimensionality of the themes and categories, respondents’ narratives were compared, resolving any discrepancies and noting similarities. Additionally, the relationship of the themes and categories was examined taking note of any negative cases. These core themes served as the unifying link between all patterns and denoted a working theory that depicts the phenomena captured by the survey questions. As a final step, interviews were analyzed in relation to race, education level, and language of the interview to find if there are any similarities or differences between these groups. Because the number of interviewees is so small and the sample was not random, these comparisons should only be considered exploratory.

In sum, data for this dissertation was drawn from data collected by the QDRL at NCHS to test a sexual identity question for NHIS. An analysis of the 139 cognitive interviews that were conducted for that project informed chapter IV on ways to improve sexual identity measurement and chapter V on ways to improve trans identity measurement on official surveys. A series of 10 interviews were also conducted with trans individuals about their identity process across the life course and these provide the data for chapter VI. These interviews serve to provide a sociological means to assess the trans life course and to make sense of identity measurement on official surveys.

## Chapter IV: Improving Sexual Identity Measurement on Official Surveys<sup>28</sup>

As noted in Chapter III, the QDRL tested a new sexual identity question for the NHIS. To test the newly revised question on sexual identity, the QDRL conducted 139 cognitive interviews: 94 in English and 45 in Spanish. The newly tested question is shown below:

**English: Do you think of yourself as:**

[For men:] Gay	[For women:] Lesbian or gay
[For men:] Straight, that is, not gay	[For women:] Straight, that is, not lesbian
	or gay
Bisexual	
Something Else ( <i>Go to A</i> )	
Don't Know ( <i>Go to B</i> )	

**Spanish: Usted piensa en sí mismo como...**

[For men:] Gay	[For women:] Lesbiana o gay
[For men:] Heterosexual, o sea no gay	[For women:] Heterosexual, o sea no lesbiana o gay
Bisexual	
Otra cosa ( <i>Go to A</i> )	
No sabe ( <i>Go to B</i> )	

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<sup>28</sup> This chapter was drawn from a previously published co-authored report with Dr. Kristen Miller (2012) entitled "Design, Development and Testing of the NHIS Sexual Identity Question" The full report is available at: [http://wwwn.cdc.gov/qbank/report/Miller\\_NCHS\\_2011\\_NHIS%20Sexual%20Identity.pdf](http://wwwn.cdc.gov/qbank/report/Miller_NCHS_2011_NHIS%20Sexual%20Identity.pdf). Permissions from the co-author (Dr. Miller) to use the parts of this report that I sole authored can be found in Appendix A. University guidelines outlining rules for inclusion of previously co-authored material are included in Appendix B. Use of this material meets all University guidelines.

**C. English: [If ‘something else’ is selected] By something else, do you mean that...**

You are not straight, but identify with another label such as queer, trisexual, omnisexual or pan-sexual  
You are transgender, transsexual or gender variant  
You have not figured out your sexuality or are in the process of figuring it out  
You do not think of yourself as having sexuality  
You do not use labels to identify yourself  
You made a mistake and did not mean to pick this answer  
You mean something else (*Go to C*)

**Spanish: Cuando dice Otra Cosa, quiere decir que...**

Usted es gay o lesbiana, pero se identifica más con otras clasificaciones como queer, multisexual, o trisexual  
Usted es transgénero o transexual  
Usted no sabe o está en el proceso de descubrir su sexualidad  
Usted no piensa en sí mismo como teniendo una sexualidad  
Rechaza personalmente todas las etiquetas para describir a su persona  
Usted se equivocó y no quiso escoger esta respuesta  
Usted quiere decir otra cosa [*Go to 6c*]

**D. English: You did not enter an answer for the question. That is because you:**

You don’t understand the words  
You understand the words, but you have not figured out your sexuality or are in the process of figuring it out  
You mean something else

**Spanish: Cuando dice No Sabe, quiere decir que...**

Usted no entiende las palabras  
Usted entiende las palabras, pero no sabe o está en el proceso de descubrir su sexualidad  
Quiere decir otra cosa

**C. English:[If ‘you mean something else’ is selected]**

What do you mean by something else? Please type in your answer

**Spanish: ¿Que quiere decir por otra cosa?**

Por favor escriba su respuesta:

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In comparison to previous versions of the sexual identity question (including the 2006 NSFG version), data from the cognitive interviews indicate that this newly

developed version is a noticeable improvement. In all but 10 of the 139 interviews, respondents selected the response category that best reflected their sexual identity. That is, respondents' answers were based on the ways in which they conceptualize their own sexuality (this will be fully discussed below). This was true for all age and socio-economic groups. Notably, almost all heterosexual respondents opted for the 'straight, that is, not gay,' response option with no difficulty.

The presence of the 'something else' category along with the follow-up question also proved to be a successful revision. All respondents who opted for this category were able to effectively classify themselves within one of the provided options. Unlike previous versions of the question, none of these respondents were heterosexual; non-minority respondents answered by selecting the 'straight, that is, not gay' category. Thus, we believe that the revision of the heterosexual category resolves the missing data problem, including heterosexuals choosing the 'something else' category. It should also be noted that only one Spanish-speaking respondent selected the 'don't know option' because she was not familiar with the terminology. The 'something else' option was most frequently chosen by transgender respondents, who then selected the transgender option in the follow-up question. Other respondents who selected the 'something else' option included those respondents who identify as queer, do not use labels to identify themselves, have not figured out their sexuality or do not consider themselves to have a sexuality.

### Question Interpretation for Straight Respondents

As was found in previous QDRL studies, many non-LGBT respondents did not possess salient sexual identities<sup>29</sup>. Additionally, as in previous studies, for these respondents it was not so much an association with a particular sexual identity that mattered as it was a disassociation from a gay identity. When asked about their sexual identity, many respondents simply said that they are “not gay.” During probing a number of respondents indicated that they chose this option specifically because it said “not gay” and that this is what made the question easy for them to answer. One respondent, for example, felt that it was insulting to gay people to call oneself straight – “you’re just not gay” she noted. Another respondent was asked if she would use the word ‘straight’ to describe herself in her everyday interactions. After pausing for a moment the respondent answered, “I would just say that I am not involved in a gay relationship.” She went on to say “I don’t know why they use that word.....cuz really to me the word is ‘not gay.’ I don’t know why people define it as straight and gay.” Another respondent said that he was confused by the category ‘straight,’ but when saw ‘that is, not gay,’ he knew immediately which category applied to him. Another respondent who identified as straight said that to her this meant that she “doesn’t mess around or do things out of the ordinary.” Another respondent said plainly that to be straight means she “don’t act like they do.”

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<sup>29</sup> It is important to note that this question was asked within the context of other demographic questions. It is known from past research (Ridolfo, Miller, and Maitland 2012) that the context of a sexual identity question may impact the way respondents interpret the question. For example, asking the question within the context of other questions about deviant behavior (alcohol use, drug use, criminal behavior) versus asking the question within the context of someone’s sex, age, and height, will influence the respondent’s interpretation of the question including, potentially, the social desirability of response.

### Question Interpretation for Sexual Minority Respondents

Almost all sexual minorities answered this question based on their conception of self, that is, how they identify themselves. As found in previous studies, these respondents consider their sexual identity to be a central component of their sense of self. Respondents based their conceptualization on a number of factors – membership in a larger community, political activism, various personality characteristics, and relationship status. What is true of all of these factors, however, is that they are all various mechanisms through which respondents make sense of their sexual identity.

One way in which respondents framed their sexual identity was through membership in a larger community. Many of the respondents saw themselves as members of a larger sociopolitical group, and they conceptualized their identity based on an affiliation with a larger LGBT community. One respondent, for example, said that they define gay simply as “the whole community.” Another respondent said that “I guess I define myself as gay because I’m part of this larger gay community you know...it’s like my social standing or whatever.” Another mechanism by which respondents informed their sense of self was through what they perceived to be political activism. There was a clear theme among many of the minority-identified respondents that their sexual identity was strongly tied to a sense of political activism. In a culture where homosexuality has been and continues to be heavily politicized, this sort of activist affiliation is seen to be a logical base for identity development. One respondent, for example, who identified as ‘something else’ said that they do not really like to use labels but that they feel that they should do so in order to educate people.

Several of the respondents viewed certain personality traits as expressions of their (and others') identity as a sexual minority. One male respondent who identifies as gay, for example, made sense of his identity based on his perception of characteristics he finds to be inherent to gay people. He said that to be gay means to be happy living a certain lifestyle that involves "being free, ecstatic, dramatic, full of zest and flavor." He went on to mention all of the artistic gifts that gay people have been given. He further noted that it had nothing to do with sex as he has not had sexual relations in five years yet he still identifies as gay. Another respondent said that to be gay means that he can't think like a straight person – "they just think differently than I do." He said that straight people are more "closed minded" and "focused on that machismo bullshit" while gay people are "more open minded" and "open to new possibilities."

The sex of one's relationship partner was another mechanism by which some respondents made sense of their sexual identity. One female respondent, who identifies as 'something else,' for example, is currently in a relationship with a man but has been in relationships with women before. She said at the time of her relationship with a self-identified lesbian, she identified herself as "Maria-sexual," based on the name of her partner. She makes sense of her identity not based on behavior or attraction but rather based on the relationship that she is in at the time.

#### Question Interpretation for Transgender Respondents

Transgender people often have a difficult time fitting into either the heterosexual or the LGB community, although they feel a greater affinity for the



latter. For this reason, many trans respondents referred to the gay community in broader, more encompassing terms than LGB or heterosexual respondents. Thus, a number of transgender respondents conceived of the term “gay” as both an individual identity as well as an umbrella term for a larger community of sexual minorities (the exact composition of that community varied among respondents). One transgender respondent said that although gay can specifically refer to a man who is masculine it can also be used to refer to “the whole community.” Another transgender respondent wanted to choose the term transgender but since it was not available chose gay because she felt that this was the closest option for her since it would include her in the LGBT community. Another transgender respondent said that she thinks of the term gay as being in the middle of a big circle of other terms like bisexual and transsexual and that ‘gay’ is the word used to describe all of these things. She said that ‘gay’ is the generic word used to describe all of these other terms, but that it is not specific enough and she would not identify this way. Instead, she identifies specifically as transsexual.

#### Cases of Response Problems

Of the 10 respondents who did not answer according to their sexual identity (and which could be considered error) 3 were sexual minority respondents and the other 7 were Spanish-speaking respondents. Of the sexual minority respondents, 2 interpreted the question as a behavior question as opposed to an identity question and, consequently, answered bisexual. One woman, for example, who identifies as ‘queer,’ answered bisexual because she surmised that a CDC survey must be asking

about her behavior, not her self-conceptualization. The other respondent not basing his answer on identity was transgender and answered according to the clinical records where his gender transitioning occurred, which was bisexual. While these cases do represent what would be considered error, it was deemed imprudent to make a revision to the question because any ‘fix’ would likely generate other types of error. Rather, these authors believe it may be more prudent to embed this question among other demographic or self-identification questions as opposed to other behavioral questions. Such a context may cue respondents to base the answer on their self-identification as opposed to their behavioral history.

The 7 Spanish-speaking respondents who answered incorrectly were respondents who did not understand the word ‘gay,’ but were more familiar with the term ‘heterosexual.’ Since the word ‘gay’ (along with the term ‘straight’) is also an English-derived term, some of the Latino respondents were unable to make sense of the phrase ‘no es gay.’ For these respondents, absence of the term ‘heterosexual’ generated more (as opposed to less in comparison to their English-speaking counterparts) response problems. For example, one Latino who answered something else later revealed that he is heterosexual but that he did not see that option listed for this question. Similarly, a Latina respondent answered bisexual, but during probing revealed that, because she had to think very quickly and did not see the option for heterosexual, chose bisexual.

Additionally for Spanish-speaking respondents, because the word ‘heterosexual’ was not listed, other terms, specifically ‘bisexual’ and ‘lesbiana o gay,’ were misinterpreted. For example, one Latina who answered ‘bisexual’ explained

during probing that bisexuals are those who only sleep with men. Realizing her mistake she said “oh no! Bisexual means that they have sex with both men and women. I’m heterosexual!” She went on to say that the response categories did not include the option she was looking for – heterosexual. Another Spanish-speaking respondent answered ‘lesbian or gay’ because he was not sure what the word is for men who only like women. He couldn’t remember if it was bisexual or heterosexual so he just chose the first response category listed. To resolve this response problem, the Spanish translation was modified shortly after these Spanish interviews, and it is believed that this modification will minimize, if not eliminate, these instances. It should be noted that none of the Spanish speaking respondents had difficulty selecting the response category that best reflected their sexual identity after the word ‘heterosexual’ was added.

#### Interpretation of the Term ‘Heterosexual’

Perhaps most controversial about this revised question in comparison to previous questions about sexual identity is the non-appearance of the term ‘heterosexual’ as a response option. For English interviews, we found no evidence to suggest the presence of response error or any response difficulty because the word ‘heterosexual’ was not listed. This was true for all English-speaking demographic groups across heterosexuals. Even those respondents who said that they used the word ‘heterosexual’ to self-identify were also familiar with the word ‘straight’ or related to the concept ‘not gay.’ In no case did an English speaking respondent

indicate that they did not know how to answer because the word 'heterosexual' was not there.

Consistent with previous studies, in the follow-up probing, it was found that many lower socio-economic non-minority respondents either did not know or misunderstood the term 'heterosexual.' For example, when asked what heterosexual meant one English-speaking respondent said, "Who?," and then asked the interviewer what that word meant and how to pronounce it. Another female respondent noted that she was familiar with the term heterosexual but wasn't entirely sure what it meant. A number of respondents confused the term 'heterosexual' with being homosexual and with being bisexual. For example, when asked what heterosexual meant one respondent answered that "it means men who like men." One female respondent explained that heterosexual means you can go with both men and women. Another respondent said that it is "somebody who goes both ways." Yet another respondent pointedly replied that "heterosexual means the same thing as bisexual."

Indeed, many of those who knew the definition of heterosexual remained unsure. When asked why he chose the answer he did, one respondent said it was because he identifies as "heterosexual or as someone who only likes women, unless I'm wrong about the definition of heterosexual." Another respondent who was also unsure said that they were fairly confident it meant the same thing as straight but they weren't totally sure about that. This last respondent emphasized the point that even for those respondents who might know the term 'heterosexual,' the use of more common language is a more guaranteed way to ensure respondent comprehension of response options.

Although sexual minorities tended to be more familiar with sexual identity-related terms, there were instances, particularly related to the word ‘heterosexual,’ when they were not. One lesbian, for example, said that the word she would use for someone who likes the opposite sex is straight. When probed whether there was another word for this she said “I think the word is heterosexual, but maybe it’s homosexual.” She said that either way it didn’t matter to her because these words are basically for people who “deal with” the opposite sex.

For English-speakers, even among those who knew the term ‘heterosexual,’ there was still a clear preference for the word ‘straight.’ Several respondents noted that the term ‘heterosexual’ (and on occasion, but not always, the term ‘homosexual’) is a very scientific term and not what they use in everyday language. One respondent noted that he thought he had heard the term ‘heterosexual’ in science class. An English speaking male responded that he uses the word ‘straight’ to describe himself normally and only uses the term heterosexual at school and when asked directly if he is a heterosexual or not. Most importantly, even among those who do use the word ‘heterosexual,’ straight was also understood.

In sum, the reasons for omitting the word ‘heterosexual’ in a response option of the English version of the question are three-fold: 1) it is not the word that most people use in their everyday speech, 2) it is not required, as people understand the word ‘straight,’ and 3) many people are confused, do not understand, or misunderstand the word ‘heterosexual.’ The word ‘straight,’ although considered by some respondents to be slang, was understood by all English speaking respondents and, equally as important, understood to mean what is implied by a heterosexual

identity. The usage of the word 'straight' and the removal of the word 'heterosexual' in combination with the phrase 'not gay,' therefore, were found to greatly reduce conceptual confusion among respondents.

As previously noted, the above findings did not hold true for Spanish speaking respondents. Because there is no word for 'straight' in Spanish (although many Spanish speakers who had been living in the United States for a while were familiar with this term), the option simply read 'no es gay.' 'No es gay' was not clear because the term 'gay' is also an English term that is not always understood (as these few cases illustrate). For Spanish speakers, the term 'heterosexual' was found to be much more commonly used and understood. That is, as far as usage and familiarity, the term 'heterosexual' in Spanish is comparable to the term 'straight' in English. For example, two respondents noted that they would have chosen 'heterosexual' had they seen this option but since they did not see it instead chose 'something else' and 'bisexual.'

Even among Spanish speaking heterosexuals who did not have problems selecting the response option that best reflected their sexual identity, there was a strong sentiment that the presence of the word 'heterosexual' would have made the question easier to answer. One respondent, for example, when asked how she understood 'no lesbiana o gay' said "this is maybe where heterosexual goes?" Another respondent when asked what other words he would use to describe 'no es gay' said that heterosexual was the most common word used for this. Yet another said that she found 'no es gay' to be confusing and instead would have chosen the words 'heterosexual' or 'straight.' Our data suggests that, although not always used, the

term ‘heterosexual’ is more commonly used among Spanish speakers. In response to this finding, the response option was changed from ‘no es gay’ to ‘heterosexual, o sea, no es gay.’ This was then tested on 18 respondents, none of which had error or response difficulty.

All of the above evidence points to how language is critical to constructing reality. Depending on the language of the response options given, respondents were able to more, or less, accurately place themselves in the appropriate category. The example of how “heterosexual” works for the Spanish version of the question but not for the English version also highlights how language impacts the socially constructed and understood categories for self-identification. The inability to directly translate a question adds weight to the argument that concepts, as expressed linguistically through words, are products of social and cultural constructions that can vary by place and time.

#### Interpretation of the Terms ‘Gay,’ ‘Lesbian,’ and ‘Homosexual’

As revealed in the comparison of the 2002 and 2006 NSFG data, the addition of the term ‘gay’ appears to increase conceptual clarity among respondents (as well as the addition of the word ‘heterosexual’ as discussed in the previous section). The data from the question is re-presented in Table 4.1 below:

**Table 4.1** Comparison of 2002 and 2006 NSFG sexual identity measures

	Heterosexual Heterosexual or straight,	Homosexual, Homosexual, gay, (or lesbian,)	Bisexual,	Something else?	Don't Know/Refused
NSFG 2002- 03	89.6	1.7	2.4	4.2	2.0
NSFG 2006- 08	94.5	1.3	2.5	0.4	1.2

As shown in the data, the percentage of missing cases changed from 6.2 to 1.6% when the question wording was modified. Cognitive interviews revealed that ‘gay’ is the word used most commonly by both sexual minorities and non-sexual minorities alike to refer to sexual minorities. For this reason, it was not often unknown or misunderstood (cases of response error are discussed below). The term ‘lesbian’ was also commonly understood by respondents with no cases of conceptual confusion among either English or Spanish speaking respondents. The term was generally understood to mean the same thing as gay with the exception of one respondent who reported that she uses the word lesbian to refer to herself but does not use the word ‘gay.’ For example, when a respondent who reported that she uses both the word ‘gay’ as well as ‘lesbian’ to describe herself was asked which she preferred, she responded, “I would choose lesbian, but it’s still the same.” Alternatively, another female respondent said that she uses both gay and lesbian to refer to herself but that she has a slight preference for gay. Another respondent said that she defines herself as a lesbian but that the term gay would also apply to her since it is a broader term encompassing “both men and women who like the same gender.” Thus, although



there was variation in preference for the term gay or the term lesbian, there was no conceptual confusion created by the term 'lesbian.'

Evidence was found not to use the term 'homosexual' in the response options. Like the term 'heterosexual,' 'homosexual' was misunderstood or not known by respondents in 14 of the 139 interviews<sup>30</sup>. One English speaking respondent, for example, knew the term gay but not the terms heterosexual or homosexual. Another female respondent explained that, to her, being homosexual means being attracted to the opposite sex. In addition, and like the term 'heterosexual,' even when the term 'homosexual' was understood it was often seen as an overly clinical term or, unlike the term 'heterosexual,' seen in a pejorative light. One Spanish speaking respondent noted that to refer to gays she uses the term "chicos gays" because the word 'homosexual' is "stronger" and has a negative connotation. An English speaking respondent said that he only hears the word 'homosexual' used when speaking disparagingly of people, for example with reference to a "homosexual agenda." Another gay male acknowledged that homosexual does not have any inherently bad meaning but that people "don't use it properly.... and they say it with disdain."

Some respondents acknowledged that they might use the word 'homosexual' but only in certain circumstances. For example, one gay male respondent said that he might identify as homosexual to a foreigner "who might not know what gay means." Another said he uses the word 'homosexual' "only in the context of jokes." Another context for the usage of the word homosexual seems to be generational. For example, one 88 year old respondent said that her grandchildren always correct her when she

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<sup>30</sup> I would like to strongly re-emphasize the point that cognitive interviewing results are not based on random samples and therefore no extrapolations about the larger population should be drawn from this data. It does, however, suggest a pattern of interpretation which could lead to response error.

uses the word homosexual and tell her that the word is just gay. This latter point illustrates the larger point that even when homosexual is the preferred word choice, respondents are still familiar with the term gay.

There were a small number of Spanish speaking respondents who noted that the term ‘gay’ might not always be understood by other Spanish speaking respondents because it is an English word. One respondent, for example, said that he uses the term ‘gay’ with his friends in the States but ‘homosexual’ with his friends back in El Salvador. This would be consistent with our finding that those who had lived in the United States longer were also more likely to understand the term ‘straight,’ another English language slang (although this term was not used on the Spanish version, it was still mentioned by several respondents). One reason for this is that each country has its own specific slang for gay people, most of which are fairly insulting. One respondent, for example, said that the lower class in his country use the terms “maricones” or “culeros” and only the upper class really uses the term gay. Although this potential source of error should be noted, in none of our 45 Spanish language interviews did we encounter a respondent who was unable to select the sexual identity that best represented them because of the presence of the term ‘gay’ (or the absence of the term ‘homosexual’).

While a few confused the term gay with being heterosexual or bisexual, a fair number of non-minority respondents believed that the term ‘gay’ meant taking on some characteristic of being transgender, that is acting, dressing, or taking on the characteristics of the opposite gender. One respondent, for example, talked about gays as “men who wear ladies clothes.” This was echoed by another respondent who said

that gay men dress like females and wear bras and skirts. Another respondent defined being a lesbian as someone with the body of a woman but the attitudes of a man. Yet another respondent answered that “a gay” is a man who dresses like women and likes men while another said a gay person is someone “trying” to be male or female, especially men who “try to play a female role.” This misunderstanding was also found among Spanish speaking respondents. One heterosexual Spanish speaking respondent, for example, said that gay means when a man wants to be a woman or to act like a woman. Another Spanish speaking respondent said that gay men are biologically men but want to be women and are not well defined in their identity. Again, it is difficult to determine if these are actually instances of conceptual confusion or, more likely, misunderstanding due to homophobia. Either way, they did not appear to impact respondents’ ability to properly select the response option that best reflected their sexual identity.

To a certain extent, some heterosexual respondents—particularly Spanish-speaking respondents—conflated being gay with a dimension of gender identity. For example, one respondent said, “if you’re male, you’re straight. If you’re female, you’re straight.” Another noted that, “I’m normal. I’m a woman. I’m feminine,” thus expressing not only a confusion with gender identity but the reference to “normal” also implies an association with a “not-me” identity. A number of other respondents answered this question by simply saying “soy hombre” (I am a man) or “soy mujer” (I am a woman). The underlying theme of these respondents can be summed up by one who said that heterosexuals “don’t feel like a man one day and a woman the next.”

### Interpretation of the Term ‘Bisexual’

Although there was some confusion over the meaning of the term ‘bisexual’, it did not lead to response error problems because those people that did not know what the term meant did know the category with which they identified – i.e. gay or not gay – and so knew for sure that bisexual was not for them. In the English speaking cases where bisexual was chosen as response error, it was done not because of confusion over the term, but rather because these respondents thought the question was asking about behavior rather than identity (as discussed above).

That said, there were some respondents who did not know what the term ‘bisexual’ means. One respondent, for example, said she had heard of the term but added “I don’t quite understand what it means.” Even many respondents who knew the meaning of the word ‘bisexual’ still had definitions typically rooted in being gay or heterosexual. For example, one respondent said that being bisexual meant being “heterosexual and attracted to the same sex.” This respondent started with an understanding of heterosexual and then built from it.

Other respondents confused the meaning of bisexual with either gay, heterosexual, or transgender. One respondent, for example, said that it was just another term for gay – “sounds like the same thing to me,” he said. Another verified that it meant the same to her as heterosexual. One male respondent who identifies as gay but is married to a woman said that the word bisexual is just a “cover word” for people who think the word gay means something bad. Another respondent said that bisexual is either someone who watches a couple have sex or a woman that enjoys

sex with men and women but they are not certain which one. Another respondent said that a bisexual person tries to be “a woman and a man at the same time.”

Even among those who understood the general concept of bisexuality, there was still sometimes confusion over its precise meaning. One transgender respondent, for example, revealed that although he has sex with both men and women, he does not consider himself bisexual because he thinks bisexual means that half the time you are attracted to men and half the time you are attracted to women whereas he is attracted to women 80% of the time and men only 20% of the time.

Some respondents knew the concept of bisexuality, but not the word. One female heterosexual, for example, said that you can like a man and a woman at the same time but she was not sure what the word to describe this would be. An elderly female respondent seemed to understand the concept but not be familiar with the word. She said that someone is either gay or not gay (reinforcing our earlier point of the not-me identity) but that someone might be somewhere in the middle. She assumed, however, that this person would then select ‘don’t know.’

Confusion over the term bisexuality was also found among Spanish speaking respondents. One such respondent said that bisexual meant someone who likes women but also “likes gays.” Another Spanish respondent said that bisexuals have a personal conflict on how to define themselves. Another, unable to clearly articulate a definition, could only say that a bisexual is “someone who is a human being.” This is further evidence that sexuality is conceived of differently among Spanish speakers.

Behavior seemed to be much more prevalent in respondent’s conception of bisexuality. One heterosexual female, for example, said that bisexual means people

who sleep with their own sex and the opposite sex. She said that unlike being gay, being bisexual necessarily involves sex. Another common response was that bisexual implies “going both ways” with follow up references to sexual activity with both males and females. Along these lines one lesbian respondent said that bisexual means “when you don’t know which sex you want to be with and you just take them both.”

#### Interpretation of the Response Category ‘Something Else’

The response option for ‘something else’ was well understood by those who identified as something else. Many transgender respondents, for example, selected something else on the basis of their transgender identity. Several of the trans respondents noted that the first thing they looked for was a ‘transgender’ response option<sup>31</sup> but when they did not find this option, these respondents then chose ‘something else’ assuming that that is what it meant. There were also respondents who identify as queer, do not use labels to identify themselves, and are asexual – all sub-options of the ‘something else’ response category - who were also able to accurately select this category as the one that best reflected their sexual identity.

Even many of the non-transgender respondents felt that ‘something else’ implied some variation of an understanding of transgender. One respondent, for example, said that something else is for those people who don’t know what they want to be – male or female – and that they have not found their sexuality yet. Another respondent felt that maybe it was for people who didn’t want to openly identify as gay or who were transgender or “lost” and don’t really know what they are. Others

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<sup>31</sup> This was certainly not the case for all trans respondents as some chose “gay or lesbian” or “straight, that is not gay” without debate.

noted that it was a category for people who are not a lesbian or a homosexual. A gay male respondent said that “there are so many letters now” and so it gives people a chance to pick something different.

Some respondents, especially those who did not identify as ‘something else’ had varying initial conceptions of what the ‘something else’ category could possibly mean or simply had no idea what it might imply. A heterosexual female, for example, said that something else made no sense to her because either you are straight or you are not. Another heterosexual respondent thought that “maybe they like dogs.” Another female respondent said that something else could be a hermaphrodite. She said that she knew a couple of hermaphrodites and that these are people born “with both sexes, both organs,” and then their parents decide if they want to raise them as a boy or a girl. Another respondent said it was for someone who doesn’t know if they like men or women and is the same as the ‘don’t know’ option.

### Conclusions

Overall, analysis of the 139 cognitive interviews leads to at least four main conclusions that help address the first research question – *how might survey wording affect sexual minority and non-minority respondents’ choices of self-reported sexual identity and its consequent distribution on official surveys?*:

- The absence of the word ‘heterosexual’ on the English language question is helpful to reduce response difficulty. It is important to use common vernacular in order to reduce conceptual confusion. Thus, while the absence

of the term ‘heterosexual’ did not lead to any confusion among respondents in any demographic, its presence did.

- The presence of the word ‘heterosexual’ on the Spanish language question helps respondents make sense of other response categories. Since there is no conceptual translation for the word ‘straight’ in Spanish the presence of ‘heterosexual,’ a word more commonly used by Spanish speakers than English ones, is useful to provide context not only for this option but for the others as well.
- For many heterosexuals the concept of sexual identity is not salient. They do not so much identify with being heterosexual as they dis-identify with being gay. To this end, the addition of ‘that is, not gay’ was useful in helping these respondents select the optimal response category.
- Due to the presence of the ‘not gay’ wording, it is necessary to put this response category lower than the ‘gay’ category. This is not only logically more correct, it also encourages respondents to more deeply consider previous response options.

This chapter used cognitive interviewing and a social constructionist perspective to demonstrate how survey wording might affect sexual minority and non-minority respondents’ choices of self-reported sexual identity. In the next chapter, I will turn my attention more specifically to trans respondents and the ways in which survey wording might affect their response rates to both a gender as well as a sexual identity question.



## Chapter V: Improving Trans Identity Measurement on Official Surveys

In this chapter, I will examine the patterns of interpretation of trans respondents to both a gender as well as a sexual identity question in order to understand how trans identities might be better captured on official surveys. I will examine trans respondents' responses to a gender identity question as well as a sexual identity question individually and then compare the two response sets to look for overlapping patterns. In both questions, trans appeared as a sub-option, that is a follow-up option, to one of the primary response options.

Data from this chapter were drawn from the larger cognitive interviewing project outlined in the previous chapter. Of the 139 interviews conducted to test the sexual identity question, 21 were with trans respondents. These respondents were identified in three principle ways – 1) a response of “trans” to either the gender or the sexual identity question on the questionnaire being tested, 2) an explanation during the cognitive interview that although they did not choose “trans” as a response option, they would have a) at a previous point in their life, or b) if they had known it was an option (it was listed as a sub-option), and 3) recruitment through a transgender listserv. Although this chapter will pay particular attention to the responses of those

respondents identified as trans, responses of non-trans respondents will also be analyzed in order to determine how they understood the response categories.

Table 5.1 presents respondent demographics for this analysis.

**Table 5.1** Trans Respondent Demographics

<b>Interviews Completed:</b>	<b>21</b>	
	<b>Count</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
<b>Gender</b>		
Male	5	23.8
Female	9	42.9
More Complicated	7	33.3
<b>Sexual Identity</b>		
Straight, that is, not gay	3	14.3
Gay or Lesbian	4	19.0
Bisexual	2	9.5
Something Else	12	57.1
<b>Education</b>		
Less than HS degree	4	19.0
High School Degree/GED	4	19.0
Some college, no degree	4	19.0
Associates Degree	3	14.3
Bachelors	5	23.8
Graduate School	1	4.8
<b>Race*</b>		
Blank**	7	33.3
White	7	33.3
Black or African American	4	19.0
American Indian or Alaska Native	2	9.5
Don't Know	2	9.5
<b>Language</b>		
English	10	47.6
Spanish	11	52.4
<b>Age</b>		
18-25	3	14.3
26-35	11	52.4
36-45	4	19.0
46+	3	14.3

\*These numbers total 22 because one respondent answered both White and American Indian or Alaska Native

\*\* Many of these blank responses were the result of Latinos not being sure which race to mark since they did not see an option for Latino

### Transgender Identities Reflected through a Gender Identity Question

All respondents were asked the gender identity question below. This question appeared as the first question on the survey and was written with the goal of providing trans respondents a response option outside of the traditional dichotomous male and female response options.

**English:** Do you consider yourself to be... Male, Female, or It is more complicated (Go to 1a)?

**Spanish:** Usted se considera ser... Hombre, Mujer, o Es más complicado (Go to 1a)?

**English Followup:** [If it is complicated is selected] By answering it's complicated, do you mean that...

Male, assigned female at birth

Female, assigned male at birth

Masculine, assigned female at birth

Feminine, assigned male at birth

Transgender or genderqueer, assigned female at birth

Transgender or genderqueer, assigned male at birth

Something else

I didn't mean to choose this option

**Spanish Followup:** [If it is more complicated is selected] Cuando dice es más complicado, quiere decir que...

Hombre, al nacer asignado como mujer

Mujer, al nacer asignado como hombre

Masculino, al nacer asignado como mujer

Femenina, al nacer asignado como hombre

Transgénero o géneroqueer, al nacer asignado como hombre

Transgénero o géneroqueer, al nacer asignado como hombre

Algo diferente

No quise elegir esta opción

Responses from trans respondents fell across the range of potential response options – ‘male’, ‘female’, and ‘it is more complicated’. Table 5.2 summarizes trans respondents’ responses to the tested gender question.

Table 5.2: Responses to Gender Identity Question by Trans Respondents

<u>Gender Identity Category*</u>	<u>Frequency</u>
Male	5
Female	9
It is more complicated	7
Transgender or genderqueer, assigned male	3
Transgender or genderqueer, assigned female	2
Masculine, assigned female	1
Feminine, assigned male	1

\*These are the English language translations

The differing responses to this question are likely a reflection of the fact that respondents were at differing points in the process of identifying as trans (an issue to be more fully explored in the next chapter). Respondents who selected male or female tended to be further along in the physical transition and/or self-identity process while those who had not yet begun or were at the very beginning of the process tended to gravitate more towards the ‘it is more complicated’ response option. One respondent who had completed their transition explained why they did not select ‘it is more complicated’ by saying:

I felt the wording to be.... not a comfortable fit for me, the wording was....awkward is not necessarily what I would describe it as. I don’t find it to be complicated because I know what it is. Trying to articulate it is a different matter. I don’t want the perception be that it is more complicated.

Another respondent who completed his transition to a male explained that he liked seeing the third option (that is something other than ‘male’ and ‘female’) available

and even considered selecting this option but said, “But I chose male because whenever I fill out any paperwork and whenever I self-identify it’s male.”

One consistent finding among trans respondents is that they liked having a third option available when discussing their gender, but they found the current wording to have a negative connotation. Twelve out of 21 trans respondents said that they either didn’t like the wording of ‘it is more complicated’ or said that the option was “not for them.” Respondents stated that the ‘it is more complicated’ response option was for people who were still questioning their gender or people transitioning genders. Additionally, three respondents stated that they did not view their gender as being complicated therefore they did not feel that this response option was right for them. One respondent said, “I don’t see it as being complicated, just different.” Another respondent asked, “Why is it complicated that I’m neither [male or female]?” While another respondent went so far as to say that he felt that the phrase “it is more complicated” made it sound like he “had issues” because of his trans status.

Additionally, trans respondents described their gender as being socially constructed (an affirmation of the overarching sociological theme of this dissertation). Interviews were coded as “gender as socially constructed” if the respondent mentioned their behavior, actions, appearance, clothing choices, or hobbies in explaining their gender. Overall, seventy percent of trans respondents described their gender as being socially constructed. In explaining what defines them as a female, one trans respondent said, “[Its] Not so much biological, but mental... In my mind I more associate with the female gender.” Responses similar to this were much more common in interviews with trans respondents than in interviews with non-trans

respondents. This points to the possibility that trans respondents might come to view their gender as less definitive and fixed than non-trans respondents (an issue to be more fully explored in the next chapter).

Another issue arose with the ‘it is more complicated’ follow-up question. Four respondents in Spanish interviews noted that they found the response options under the ‘it is more complicated’ follow-up question to be confusing. Many respondents noted that they were confused about the differences between the response options. This problem did not arise in English interviews, indicating that Spanish speaking trans individuals might use different terminology than English speaking trans individuals or that there are some problems in the translation of the terminology from English. The higher average education levels of the English speaking trans respondents might also explain why none of them found the response sub-options for the ‘it is more complicated’ follow-up to be confusing.

#### Transgender Identities Reflected through a Sexual Identity Question

All respondents were asked the following sexual identity question:

**English: Do you think of yourself as:**

[For men: ] Gay	[For women:] Lesbian or gay
[For men: ] Straight, that is, not gay	[For women:] Straight, that is, not
lesbian	or gay
Bisexual	
Something Else ( <i>Go to A</i> )	
Don't Know ( <i>Go to B</i> )	

**Spanish: Usted piensa en sí mismo como...**

[For men:] Gay	[For women:] Lesbiana o gay
[For men:] Heterosexual, o sea no gay	[For women:] Heterosexual, o sea no
	lesbiana o gay
Bisexual	

Otra cosa (*Go to A*)

No sabe (*Go to B*)

**E. English: [If ‘something else’ is selected] By something else, do you mean that...**

You are not straight, but identify with another label such as queer, trisexual, omnisexual or pan-sexual

You are transgender, transsexual or gender variant

You have not figured out your sexuality or are in the process of figuring it out

You do not think of yourself as having sexuality

You do not use labels to identify yourself

You made a mistake and did not mean to pick this answer

You mean something else (*Go to C*)

**Spanish: Cuando dice Otra Cosa, quiere decir que...**

Usted es gay o lesbiana, pero se identifica más con otras clasificaciones como queer, multisexual, o trisexual

Usted es transgénero o transexual

Usted no sabe o está en el proceso de descubrir su sexualidad

Usted no piensa en sí mismo como teniendo una sexualidad

Rechaza personalmente todas las etiquetas para describir a su persona

Usted se equivocó y no quiso escoger esta respuesta

Usted quiere decir otra cosa [*Go to 6c*]

**F. English: You did not enter an answer for the question. That is because you:**

You don't understand the words

You understand the words, but you have not figured out your sexuality or are in the process of figuring it out

You mean something else

**Spanish: Cuando dice No Sabe, quiere decir que...**

Usted no entiende las palabras

Usted entiende las palabras, pero no sabe o está en el proceso de descubrir su sexualidad

Quiere decir otra cosa

**C. English:[If ‘you mean something else’ is selected]**

What do you mean by something else? Please type in your answer

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**Spanish: ¿Que quiere decir por otra cosa?**

Por favor escriba su respuesta:

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The sexual identity question tested by the QDRL demonstrated an overall marked improvement over questions that had been previously tested (Miller and Ryan 2011). The goal was to develop a question that would not only reduce the rates of missing and ‘don’t know’ responses, but also help those who were answering to answer “more correctly,” that is, to reduce misclassified responses as well as reduce missing responses. To that end, three meaningful design principles were used – 1) use labels that respondents use to refer to themselves, 2) do not use labels that some respondents do not understand – particularly if those terms are not required by any other group of respondents, and 3) use follow-up questions to meaningfully categorize those respondents answering ‘something else’ or ‘don’t know’. These revisions were shown to be largely successful as the vast majority of respondents were able to select the category that best reflected their sexual identity. Of most import to the topic of this dissertation, the presence of the ‘something else’ category, and the subsequent follow-up options, was successful at helping transgender respondents more accurately identify themselves.

Table 5.3: Responses to Sexual Identity Question by Trans Respondents

<u>Sexual Identity Category*</u>	<u>Frequency</u>
Gay or Lesbian	4
Straight, that is, not gay	3
Bisexual	2
Something Else	12

\*These are the English language translations

As shown in Table 5.3, trans respondents fell across the spectrum of identifying as gay or lesbian, not gay or lesbian (and thus straight or heterosexual depending on the language in which they took the survey), and something else



(followed most typically by the response sub-option of ‘you are transgender, transsexual, or gender variant’). This complexity of response options from a single demographic is not viewed as problematic, however, as the question is intended to capture self-reported identity.

Many trans respondents referred to the gay community in broader, more encompassing terms than LGB or heterosexual respondents. Thus, a number of trans respondents conceived of the term “gay” as both an individual identity as well as an umbrella term for a larger community of sexual minorities (the exact composition of that community varied among respondents). One trans respondent said that although gay can specifically refer to a man who is masculine it can also be used to refer to “the whole community”. Another trans respondent wanted to choose the term transgender but since it was not available in the list of primary options, he chose gay because she felt that this was the closest option for him since it would include him in the LGBT community. Another trans respondent said that she thinks of the term ‘gay’ as being in the middle of a big circle of other terms like bisexual and transsexual and that gay is the word used to describe all of these things. She said that gay is the generic word used to describe all of these other terms but that it is not specific enough and she would not identify this way. Instead, she identifies specifically as transsexual.

Several interesting demographic themes emerged from the interviews as varying patterns of interpretation based not only along the lines of gender identification (discussed in depth below), but also along lines of education, age, and language of survey were identified. There was a clear relationship between years of education and propensity to select ‘something else’ with those with a high school

education or less being far more likely to identify as ‘something else’ than those with more than a high school education. It is also interesting to note that the only two respondents to identify as bisexual were both college educated, identified their gender as male, and spoke English. Overall, younger respondents (under 40) were more likely to identify as ‘something else’ or ‘gay or lesbian’ while older respondents (over 40) were more likely to identify as ‘bisexual’ or ‘straight, that is not gay’. The improving climate for ‘something else’ identified people in pop and political culture in the United States today might help make sense of this trend but the issue will be more fully explored in the following chapter.

#### *Non-Trans Interpretation of Trans*

One of the guiding principles behind the testing of this question was not to include words that would confuse other populations if those words were not specifically needed by another population. This was not found to be a problem with the trans response options on either the gender or the sexual identity question. In neither case did a non-trans respondent inadvertently select one of those options.

Some respondents, especially those who did not identify as ‘something else’ had varying initial conceptions of what the ‘something else’ category could possibly mean or simply had no idea what it might imply. A heterosexual female, for example, said that something else made no sense to her because either you are straight or you are not. Another heterosexual respondent thought that “maybe they like dogs.” Another female respondent said that something else could be a hermaphrodite. She said that she knew a couple of hermaphrodites and that these are people born “with

both sexes, both organs,” and then their parents decide if they want to raise them as a boy or a girl. Another respondent said it was for someone who doesn’t know if they like men or women and is the same as the ‘don’t know’ option. The most common understanding of the ‘something else’ category, however, was that it implied some variation of an understanding of transgender. One respondent, for example, said that something else is for those people who don’t know what they want to be – male or female – and that they have not found their sexuality yet. Another respondent felt that maybe it was for people who didn’t want to openly identify as gay or who were transgender or “lost” and don’t really know what they are. Others noted that it was a category for people who are not a lesbian or a homosexual. A gay male respondent said that “there are so many letters now” and so it gives people a chance to pick something different. Perhaps the most important finding of non-trans understandings of the something else category is that its presence did not increase response error. That is, these respondents did not choose this option because they understood that it was not for them. On the other hand, many trans respondents did choose this option thus increasing response accuracy.

### Intersection of Gender and Sexual Identity

One of the interesting, and perhaps most insightful, findings of this analysis was the relationship between how trans people identified on the gender question compared to how they identified on the sexual identity question. I wish to strongly re-emphasize that this data is not from a representative sample and therefore cannot be used to deduce larger population trends. It can, however, be used to help better

understand patterns of interpretation among respondents as qualitative data that can be used to help make sense of quantitative trends, especially important for this population since there has been no survey conducted of the trans population using a random sample, and should be read as such.

Gender identity is a particularly prominent component of sexual identity for trans respondents. Several of the trans respondents noted that the first thing they looked for was a ‘transgender’ response option<sup>32</sup>. When failing to find this option, these respondents then chose ‘something else’ assuming that that is what it meant. This association might have been heightened by the fact that the gender question also asks if someone is male, female, or it is more complicated. Even several non-trans respondents felt that ‘something else’ was connected with the ‘it is more complicated’ category on the gender question. In both cases the non-normative response was given a somewhat generic, catch-all heading. This might also help to explain why trans respondents see a stronger association between their gender identity and their sexual identity.

While respondents did understand the differences between gender identity and sexual identity, more respondents identified as transgender in the sexual identity question than the gender identity question. Ultimately, this analysis highlights the complexity of these issues among individuals. The complexity is summarized well by a respondent who currently identifies as genderqueer but is considering becoming transgender. She said, “If I were to transition into male there are some people who

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<sup>32</sup> This was certainly not the case for all trans respondents as some chose ‘gay or lesbian’ or ‘straight, that is not gay’ without debate or hesitation.

consider me straight but I don't feel like I would fit into the cissexual identity<sup>33</sup> of straight. So I guess I would go towards something else and have a very complicated sexual identity.”

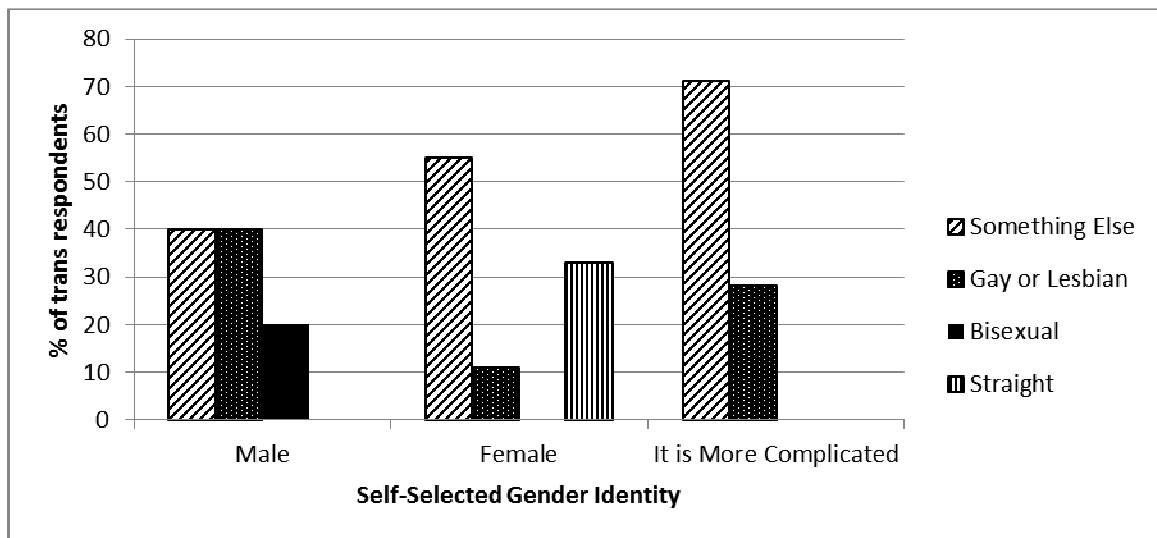


Figure 5.1: Sexual Identity by Self-Selected Gender Identity

As Figure 5.1 indicates, those who identified as ‘it is more complicated’ on the gender identity question were far more likely to identify as ‘something else’ on the sexual identity question. Those who identified as male were least likely with those who identify as female falling somewhere in between. This is not surprising as a respondent who identifies outside of the gender binary is also more likely to identify outside of hegemonic sexual identity categories as well. It is also noteworthy that the only bisexual responses came from those who identify as male and the only straight responses came from those who identify as female. Those who identified as ‘it is

<sup>33</sup> ‘Cissexual’ is a term used by many in the trans community to define those who feel that the sex and gender they were born into is the right one for them.

more complicated' on the gender question only selected either 'something else' or 'gay or lesbian'.

One of the advantages of cognitive interviewing and follow up probing is that it allows us to gain deeper insight not only into the *what* of the response, but also into the *why*. Further probing revealed that at least four of the respondents would have chosen a trans option but because they did not see it (it was not in the original set of options but rather only as a sub-option under 'something else') they chose another option. Two of these respondents ended up identifying as 'straight, that is, not gay' and two of them as 'lesbian or gay'.

One of the respondents who chose 'straight, that is, not gay' did so only after a long hesitation. He said that although he knows other people probably think of trans as more gay than straight, he does not identify as gay and so ended up not choosing it. Another respondent who also chose 'straight, that is, not gay' said she did so because she identifies as female and is attracted to men so that makes her straight. She said that if she had seen the trans option, however, she would have chosen that. She noted that she would never have gotten to that sub-option because she was very put off by the connotation of 'something else' and so she would likely not be identified as trans if that is how it is listed.

One of the respondents who chose 'lesbian or gay' said they would have picked trans right away but as it was not on the list they did not feel they had that option. Another respondent who chose 'lesbian or gay' said they use the term 'transsexual' to describe themselves "and nothing else". She never uses the term gay

to describe herself but as she did not see a trans option she felt that gay was the option with which she most closely identified.

Aside from the above misclassifications, there were also a number of other respondents who, although they did end up in the “right” category, said it would have been much easier for them if trans had been in the original list of options. One respondent noted that their “first instinct” was to choose trans. When they did not see this option, they ended up selecting ‘something else’ and then the trans sub-option.

Several of the respondents held a strong disassociation with the gay and lesbian community. Like many of the straight identified respondents, their most salient sexual identity was not a direct association, but rather a “not-me” identity, that is they defined themselves more by what they were not by what they were (McCall 2003). Several trans respondents, for example, explicitly identified as “not gay” emphasizing that just because they are trans does not mean that they are gay. One respondent when asked to identify a trans identity stated that it is a transition from being a man to being a woman or vice versa but that this does not imply that you are gay or lesbian. It simply implies that you are trans. Another respondent said:

I cannot identify myself as either lesbian or gay because.....because I am not a woman to say that I am a lesbian. And I also don't want to say that I am gay because for me it's a word that only pertains to homosexual behavior. So I thought that I could find a word that would better pertain to how I more identify.

Another respondent explained:

I don't consider myself to be gay because I feel like the term gay is intended for like gay men. And straight is I guess if you consider me to be female then the kind of guys I like I mean and they are guys are like straight guys that I've ever been with so...[...]...once next year is over [when she gets her surgery] I probably would say straight.

If the option for ‘something else’ had not been there she said would have selected straight.

Building on the above, there are also many within the trans community who still more closely associate with the conventional dichotomy of gay and straight. A clear theme among many of these respondents is that whether or not they identified this way was directly related to where they were in their transitioning process. It is interesting to note that this transitioning process was defined more by these respondents as a physical one rather than a mental, emotional, or social one. One Spanish speaking respondent, for example, said that they identified as gay because “I have not made changes to much of my body so I am gay”. Another Spanish speaking respondent said that she does not identify as a lesbian because that is a term for women who like women, and as she does not like women, she cannot be a lesbian. She also does not identify with the word gay because that is a term for men who like other men and although she likes other men, she is no longer a man. She also said that she does not identify as transgender because she is not yet a transgender – who she defines as having made the full cross-over from one sex to another – but rather is in the process of transitioning genders. Indeed, for these respondents, unlike for many other trans respondents, their identity as trans was more about *transitioning* than about a stable identity. They see their current identities as transitional rather than fixed and permanent.



## Conclusions

One of the advantages of cognitive interviewing is that it allows us to gain insight into the thought processes of respondents that can take us beyond a cursory understanding of the statistical data. In this case, probing on the gender identity and sexual identity questions proved particularly useful to gain a better understanding of why certain respondents answered the way they did and to a noteworthy extent enabled a richer understanding of the data.

Overall, the response option for ‘something else’ was well understood by those who identified as such. The ‘something else’ option was the one most frequently chosen by trans respondents, who then most frequently selected the trans sub-option in the follow-up question. Overall, the data indicate that the presence of a trans category in the list of primary response options, however, would likely have a significant effect on how members of the trans community identify both their gender identity and especially their sexual identity on official surveys.

This study faces several limitations. First, the interviews were drawn from a larger sample not specifically intended to test trans response options. That is, the purpose of the study was to test a sexual identity question more broadly and not necessarily to test the question with a focus on trans identity. This meant that probing was limited on questions that might have given more insight into the specifics of the trans option. Second, the study was conducted only in the Washington, D.C. metropolitan area. Although every effort was made to get a diverse sample of respondents, this geographic limitation no doubt played a role. Third, this study only

tested one way of asking about trans identity – that of including it as a response option.

The data obtained in this and the previous chapter could be greatly enriched by drawing on in-depth qualitative interviews with members of the trans community. Although cognitive interviewing provides a preliminary step to understanding response patterns among trans respondents and to questions with possible trans response options, it is limited in its ability to provide us a longitudinal insight into the shifting and often problematic ways in which trans respondents identify themselves on official surveys. The next chapter will detail analysis from 10 in-depth cognitive interviews done with members of the trans community to highlight how the application of a life course perspective to understanding the socially constructed nature of trans identity can help augment the findings from the previous two chapters and move us one step closer to better understanding how to better measure and make sense of trans identity on official surveys.

## Chapter VI: The Impact of Social Structure on the Life Course of Trans Individuals and its Relationship to Self-Identity on Official Surveys

In this chapter I will draw on data from 10 in-depth qualitative interviews conducted with individuals who either currently, or at some point in their life course, have identified as trans<sup>34</sup>. I will begin by discussing general stages of the trans life course as it relates to identity awareness and development as identified in these interviews. I will then discuss the ways in which social structure has impacted the life course of these respondents. I will conclude with a discussion of how the interplay between respondents' life course development and the overarching social structure impact their own self-identification on official surveys.

### Recruitment, Sampling, and Demographics

As discussed in the methods section, the primary data for this chapter was drawn from a series of 10 new in-depth qualitative interviews conducted with trans individuals. I analyze these interviews to address my third research question - *How can we understand the trans life course in a way that might enable us to make better sense of existing (and future) survey data on trans people?*. To this end, I conducted 10 in-depth qualitative interviews with trans individuals to explore how their gender non-conforming identity developed and changed over their life course. The goal of

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<sup>34</sup> In order to protect respondent confidentiality, pseudonyms were used for all respondents.

the interviews, as suggested by Fontana (2007), will be, “not just asking questions, but being able to get answers – meaningful answers” (2411).

Respondents were recruited via an announcement on a trans listserv and facebook page, an e-mail distribution list, a posting, and word-of-mouth. The announcement read as follows:

I am looking for individuals who either presently, or at one time, have identified under the broad umbrella term of transgender to conduct one hour interviews on their life course history. The goal of these interviews is to inform my dissertation research on how to better understand survey response data related to the trans community. I am particularly interested in how potential identity shifts across the life course might impact how someone self-identifies on an official survey. Interviews will aim to get at the life history of the respondent, particularly as it relates to the history of their trans identification. Interviews will last approximately one hour and will be completely anonymous. If you, or someone you know, might be interested in participating, please feel free to send me an e-mail at [jryan2@umd.edu](mailto:jryan2@umd.edu). I would be happy to answer any and all questions. Any help would be greatly appreciated!

All respondents identified themselves in some way as gender non-conforming even if they did not identify as trans per se. All interviews were conducted in English in private locations and took place in either a large metropolitan area in the West or one on the east coast.

Interviews lasted 45-120 minutes and respondents did not receive financial compensation for their time. All interviews were conducted during the fall of 2012 and took place in a private location. Interviews were audio recorded. Interview questions are included in Appendix C, although the interviews were conducted as open-ended, semi-structured, guided “conversations” rather than as formal closed-ended question-response interviews. This open-ended approach allowed for greater breadth in the answers given by respondents (Fontana 2007).

Data from the interviews was analyzed using sociological qualitative techniques, specifically, the constant comparative method (Lincoln and Guba, 1985; Strauss and Corbin, 1990; Creswell, 1998; Ridolfo and Schoua-Glusberg 2011). The constant comparative method is an inductive method of analysis that relies upon systematic coding of interview responses along with analysis of the interview data to develop theories. More specifically, grounded theory was employed (Glaser and Strauss 1967) and interviews were analyzed as they were being completed. This analysis-as-you-go technique allowed for emerging themes to be noted and built upon during the actual interviewing process.

Respondent demographics are shown below<sup>35</sup>:

Table 6.1: Qualitative Interview Respondent Demographics\*

1. What is your current gender identity?	
○ Male	4
○ Female	3
○ Transgender	5
○ Something else: _____	2
2. What is your current sexual identity?	
○ Straight	2
○ Gay or Lesbian	4
○ Bisexual	0
○ Something else (i.e. queer, asexual, you don't label yourself): _____	6
3. What is your age?	
○ 18-24	2
○ 25-34	5
○ 35-44	1
○ 45+	2

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<sup>35</sup> A discussion of sample limitations, namely, who might be left out of possible inclusion, is included in the conclusion.

4. What is your marital status?
  - ☐ Married 1
  - ☐ Divorced 1
  - ☐ Widowed 0
  - ☐ Separated 0
  - ☐ Never been married 8
  
5. Are you Hispanic or Latino
  - ☐ Yes 3
  - ☐ No 7
  
6. What is your race? Mark one or more races to indicate what you consider yourself to be.
  - ☐ American Indian or Alaska Native 0
  - ☐ Asian 0
  - ☐ Black or African American 0
  - ☐ Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander 0
  - ☐ White 8
  
7. What is the highest grade of school you have completed?
  - ☐ Less than high school 0
  - ☐ High School Graduate – Diploma or GED 1
  - ☐ Some college, but no degree 6
  - ☐ Associates Degree 0
  - ☐ Bachelor's Degree 2
  - ☐ Master's Degree 1
  - ☐ Doctorate (Ph.D.) 0
  
8. Are you currently employed?
  - ☐ Yes 9
  - ☐ No 1
  
9. What is your total annual household income?
  - ☐ \$25,000 or less 6
  - ☐ \$25,000 to \$50,000 3
  - ☐ \$50,000 or more 1

\* Note: the responses do not add up to 10 for the gender or sexual identity questions because some respondents selected more than one option. In the case of the race question, two of the Latino identified respondents did not select anything.

Table 6.2 presents a more detailed showing of the particular demographics of each respondent:

Table 6.2: Response Options of Trans Respondents by Sex at Birth and Current Identities

	Age	Sex at birth	Current Gender Identity	Current Sexual Identity
Adain	23	Female	Something Else: Queer	Something Else: Queer
Casey	20	Female	Transgender	Gay or Lesbian
Jamie	30	Female	Transgender	Something Else
Kelly	56	Male	Female / Transgender / Two-Spirit / Gender Queer	Gay or Lesbian / Something Else: Homoflexible
Liam	32	Female	Male / Transgender	Something Else: Pansexual
Mary	47	Male	Female	Straight
Miguel	27	Female	Male	Something Else: Queer
Nero	25	Female	Male	Gay or Lesbian

Pamela	35	Male	Female	Straight
Ryan	28	Female (Intersex)	Male / Transgender	Straight

### Interview Analysis

Analysis of the interviews revealed that identity development among the respondents developed in the general direction of a realization of self-identity as gender non-conforming to a change in social presentation of identity to a change in “official” identity (typically as measured by an official name change, for example, on one’s license). This progression was more dialectical than linear, however, as a change in social presentation often influenced one’s own self-understanding and a change in official identity often came to change one’s social presentation as well as self-understanding of gender, often in very interesting ways. Figure 6.1 shows this general pattern of identity development.

Figure 6.1: General pattern of trans identity development

{ Self-Identification → ← Social Presentation → ← Official Identity } Structural Factors

Structural factors also played a role in both constraining and enabling the above pattern of identity development. Social environmental factors (such as bathrooms), legal standing (such as license identification), and period effects (such as



the widespread use of the internet), all played important roles in how identity was developed and presented.

### Narratives of the Life Course of Trans Individuals

Self-identification as gender non-conforming occurred at varying times across the life course for respondents. Although most were aware that “something was different” from an early age, not all came to place a name on this difference at the same points in their life course. Transition strategies, or the ways in which each sought to bring this difference more in line with an internalized sense of self, also varied. Similarly, there was a wide variety of what each respondent hoped to achieve on the “other side” of the transition and what each sees as the future of their identity development. Although not experienced at the same points in their life histories, at least five general themes emerged among respondents that categorize their identity development experiences – 1) pre Ah-ha!, or life before putting a name to their feeling of difference, 2) key moments of revelation, or the critical moments when each came to place a name on their difference, 3) a transition stage, or the experience of actually transitioning identities, 4) the “other side”, or life post-transition, and 5) future expectations of identity development. These stages are not categorical, nor mutually exclusive but they can serve as a general framework for understanding how respondents developed their identities, particularly in relation to self-identification on official surveys.

*Pre “Ah-ha!” or, “I thought I could only be a drag queen!”*

The typical narrative expressed in popular culture of trans individuals before coming out is one of grief and despair where they are often suicidal and always uncomfortable in their own bodies. This narrative has been embedded into the popular mind time and time again through movies such as “Boys Don’t Cry” and “TransAmerica” and the headlines of transgender prostitutes and murder victims. Adain, a 23 year old self-identified queer states, “I hate the word trans [and how it is used in the media]. It’s a prostitute. It’s a murder victim. It’s some weird freak show. I’m none of those things!”. Although some of my respondents did indeed experience a similar narrative, there were others who have never experienced dysphoria because of their gender identity, at least other than that caused by a highly gendered society.

Before coming to a self-realization of their trans identity, respondents typically experienced their gender in three general, though not mutually exclusive, ways – 1) the typical trans narrative of distress and discomfort, 2) experiencing a more gender-open socialization, and 3) being unaware that trans was even an option.

Casey is a 20 year old Hispanic who self-identifies as transgender. He remembers having issues with his identity from as young as four or five years old and being uncomfortable that “I was a female and that I wasn’t interested in males”. Being raised largely by his grandparents because his mother was always working, Casey wanted to emulate the roles of his grandfather and his uncle.

I wanted to shave and do manual labor. The harder work is supposed to be done by males in our culture and that’s what I wanted to do. I grew up with the idea that the male is supposed to be the provider and I wanted to provide. (Casey)

By the time he reached his teenage years, the feeling of distress in his own body had increased. “I tried to suppress it as much as I could but by 13 or 14 it got even more difficult because that’s when I started knowing that I had attraction to females and it wasn’t there for males”. He tried to only date males to make his family happy and:

...to try to be as normal as possible and forcing myself to be female and that messed with my head a lot. The depression got worse. I think it also kind of left me with some deep seeded resentment toward my mom because I wasn’t able to be who I wanted to be who I felt I needed to be because she wanted me to be this other person. Anything I wanted to do that involved increasing masculinity and decreasing femininity she would get upset about and I would get in trouble with that. (Casey)

Nero, a 25 year old self-identified gay male (who was born into the body of a female), remembers being furious for being born into the body of a female.

I was so pissed off at the world. I remember I wouldn’t leave my room or wear anything feminine. I refused to wear pink. My neighbor got me this Barbie doll once as a gift and I hung it in the back yard. I just didn’t want to be a fucking girl!

He said that beginning as early as kindergarten he would refuse to sign things with his legal girl name and instead put his preferred boy name. And then when puberty hit and his breasts started to develop, he would wear baggy clothes to hide them. “I just didn’t want to be a fucking girl man. That was all. I just didn’t want to be a fucking girl”.

Kelly, a 56 year old who identifies in multiple ways (who was born into the body of a male), also remembers being angry about her “previous life”. She grew up in a very religious family in the suburb of a major city. During her life as a male, she was married with six children, a star athlete in high school, a landscaper, and an auto mechanic. “I was a man among men,” she claims but going on to say that “I hated my penis but I loved it when I was camping and when I was having sex”. Although she

enjoyed her penis sexually she feared getting close to women “because I was afraid they would find out that I didn’t want to be WITH them, I wanted to BE them”. She remembers her pre-transition years as largely distressful – “My life was miserable. All in all I thought I was the most hideous creature in the world”.

The above narratives point to the well-known narrative of distress and discomfort. These respondents were very unhappy with their lives and with their bodies. They knew what they did NOT want to be even better than they knew what they DID want to be. Another group of respondents experienced the direct opposite of this narrative, growing up and being socialized into more gender-open environments where they were free to express themselves however they felt.

Jamie, a 30 year old who identifies himself simply as “Jamie”, said he<sup>36</sup> never felt any sort of gender dysphoria. He was allowed to play with whatever toys he wanted and wear whatever clothes he wanted. “I wasn’t encouraged to be a little girl. I was just me”. He said he never really related “to the typical trans narrative of ‘I always felt like a little boy’ because I never really wanted to be either a little girl or a little boy. I really just wanted to be me”. His narrative is unique in that it is more difficult to map a particular pre-Ah-ha! moment since his identity never really experienced the kind of transitions often experienced by other respondents. “My identity was the same before and after and remains so”. Although he recognizes that this kind of narrative is perhaps still unusual, he noted that he feels it is becoming

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<sup>36</sup> Pronoun usage is a difficult thing when describing the narratives of trans people. In all cases, I honor the pronoun of choice by respondents rather than the pronoun of convenience that might be more comfortable for readers. In the case of Jamie, he said that he is comfortable with being “he, she, or whatever pronoun people feel most comfortable using. If someone prefers he or she, I just don’t care. It’s just a noise. Me having tattoos is more relevant to my identity”. I chose “he” simply because his physical appearance was most akin to that of a stereotypical male although it is important to note, especially in this case, that he had no strong preference either way.

increasingly common as “trans is becoming less and less about some kind of transition and more about just being who you are. There doesn’t have to be a change or some big moment of insight. Sometimes you just always know”.

Adain, a 23 year old queer, had a similar experience to Jamie in that they (their pronoun of choice) “have felt this way since day one”. They say that they know others might view them as trans, “especially if they see me with my clothes off” but that they have never really had any desire to identify this way.

I mean I know that being trans means you are born male and want to be a female or born female and want to be male but that just doesn’t really describe my experience. That’s just not me so I don’t really think of myself as trans. (Adain)

Somewhere between the experiences of those who felt dysphoria and those who felt none at all, are the experiences of Liam and Ryan. Liam has no early memory of extreme distress other than knowing something was not quite as it should be.

I never really put a name to that feeling. But I always felt just kind of...always felt uncomfortable in my skin and uncomfortable with what my...with the...um...maybe the role other people assumed I was in. I never really put that much thought into anything when I was a kid so it’s hard to look back at that time and make these kinds of judgments. (Liam)

Similarly, Ryan, a 28 year old self-identified transgender man, knew that he was different but wasn’t exactly sure what that meant. He said that looking back on it he always knew he wanted to be a guy but that at that time he didn’t think about it too much because he just didn’t know that it was really an option. “I had no idea you could transition from woman to man. I just knew people could be drag queens”. For Liam and Ryan it wasn’t a specific feeling of knowing that they wanted to change

their sex and/or gender identity but rather a more generalized feeling that something wasn't quite right.

These narratives point to the varied ways in which respondents experienced their own sense of identity prior to having any kind of an Ah-ha! moment of self-revelation. Their identities were shaped largely by generalized internal feelings although for many of them they did not yet have a word to place to their feelings. In the next section, I will examine key moments of initial awareness of gender non-conformity.

*Key Moments in Identity Revelation, or “that was the day I just went and fucking did it“*

For many respondents there were definitive, and easily remembered Ah-ha! moments when their identity crystalized to them. These experiences varied from reading a book to meeting another trans person for the first time to the reactions of strangers to their perceived gender non-conformity.

For many respondents, the idea of being trans did not exist clearly to them because they did not really know what trans was. For these respondents, simply discovering terminology and resources was the key moment in their identity recognition. For Kelly, who came to realization in the pre-internet era, she first became familiar with the term ‘transsexual’ when she was 27 years old. She would go to the library to do research “but at that time transgender wasn’t even a word so I had to look up cross-dresser or something like that. But a lot of times the article wasn’t even available, only the abstract on some microfilm or something”. She distinctly

remembers getting the internet in 1995 and that her first search was related to her identity. “I got on AOL and found a chat room for transsexuals and just immediately began taking step toward achieving that, toward becoming that”. Her transition fell short, however, as her then-wife was not immediately accepting of her proposed surgical changes. Another key moment came a year later in 1996 when she tried to commit suicide.

I did it. I just did it ya know. I didn’t want to live anymore and I just did it.....then after I got out of the hospital I was too embarrassed to go back home so I went off on my own and I guess that was when I really began to sort of transition for real. (Kelly)

In some cases, learning what trans meant did not always indicate an association with being trans but rather the opposite, a disassociation from such an identity label. Adain, who came out as a lesbian at age 15, also had two key moments of identity revelation, one of association and the other of disassociation. The first came when they were perusing a library for books on lesbianism and found a book on transgender narratives. “The stories were not very good but the idea that I could be genderqueer was something I really latched on to....it was a better approximation of my identity than dyke”. They then started going to a trans queer youth group but quickly realized that “I didn’t want to be trans because I didn’t want SRS [sex reassignment surgery]. And all those kids had these really sad stories of being homeless or wanting to kill themselves or whatever and that just wasn’t me”. Nero, who has identified as gender different since age 13, had a similar experience of disassociation.

I never identified as trans. I knew I was different but I knew I wasn’t trans. When I was 13 I picked up a copy of the DSM and found the term gender dysphoria. I always knew that mentally I

wasn't a female but I just didn't have the term for it so when I found that I started identifying as gender dysphoric. (Nero)

For some respondents, the leap to realizing oneself as trans came as a progression from realizing that one was gay or lesbian and an association with this community (although I wish to heavily stress again that many respondents have never at any point associated with or identified as a member of the gay and lesbian community). Miguel, a 27 year old Hispanic self-identified male, previously identified as a lesbian. He was volunteering at a community LGBT center when a movie was brought in discussing the lives of transwomen. "That movie really sparked the idea in me that I might be trans myself". Inspired, he did research online to find out more about what it meant to be trans. "The only thing I knew at that point was this idea of an older trans woman with a really sad story and I knew I just wasn't that". Miguel went on to join a local trans education group although as the only female-to-male he often felt ostracized and like his experiences didn't match those of the others in the group. Eventually he realized that he didn't really associate with trans so much as he did with just being a male.

The experience of Ryan bridges the gap between those who had no idea what trans was and those who simply needed exposure to a trans person to take that next step. Growing up in the rural area of a southern state, Ryan had no exposure to trans people. He had identified as a male (albeit one with a vagina) since puberty but was completely unaware that the concept of trans even existed. His revealing moment came one day when training someone at his workplace.

I was like training this dude and he handed me his ID and asked if I saw anything wrong with it. I told him no and then he pointed to the F so my first reaction was like 'dude, you can totally go get



that changed'. Then when he told me it was correct I was all like what...the...fuck. (Ryan)

Ryan went on to say that "so I decided I was going to transition "one day" until this friend of mine said "well what's stopping you? Just go fucking do it" and that was the day I just went and fucking did it".

Like Ryan, the story of Jamie also involves a little help from an outsider, although in this instance in a negative way. Societal reactions to gender nonconformity can often leave lasting negative impressions on those who are nonconforming (as will be discussed later) but the side effect is that they can also be key moments in identity revelation and acceptance. Jamie, who has identified as gender nonconforming even from a child, remembers one particularly poignant experience of his identity being noted by others.

I was down playing in the [ ] River and was just hanging out with the other kids and I didn't have a shirt on. Nobody had a shirt on. And this woman was walking by...and she was walking by...and she just started panicking...like really full on panicking...because I didn't have a shirt on.....I went home to my parents and talked about it and they explained to me that sometimes people don't get things and that people might react to me this way if I continue to choose to act and dress a certain way. But they were very supportive and so I just keep doing what I was doing, being Jamie. (Jamie)

Casey, who came to the realization that he was trans 15 months ago, remembers that his key moment in identity acceptance also came from outsider reactions.

I know one that that was a pretty definitive moment in my family accepting me, and in me accepting myself, was about a month and a half ago when my grandfather passed away and I was allowed to wear a suit to the funeral. And I was one of the pall bearers. And that was a big thing for my grandmother to allow me to do that. And my family to see me and know that 'she' was becoming a 'he'. (Casey)

Outsider reactions do not always have a positive effect, however, as in the case of Liam, who came out as trans not once, but twice. The first time he came out was about 7 years ago although he doesn't remember anything particularly striking about that first experience. "I just...and I don't even know how It came to mind, it just kind of..it feels like it just kind of appeared there...like suddenly...suddenly I knew. And started looking into SRS, the sex reassignment surgery". After coming out to his parents, Liam was thrown out of the house and has been homeless ever since. This experience had a negative effect on stalling his identity development.

I didn't consciously try to put it out of my mind but I maybe have unconsciously intended that because my living situation changed the people I was around were not open to...anything unusual like that. Um...I just didn't feel like I was in a secure place to explore that so I didn't for a long time. When it kind of came back and I felt like I couldn't ignore it anymore it was explosive. I found that the years...and it was about when I was 28...so there was a period of about five years when I was...umm...it was just...kind of suppressed. But yeah when I was 28 I slowly started to notice a neurosis I had developed as part of that suppression. For example, when I was 30 when one of my cousins left on a mission and my parents told me I could not go if I did not wear a skirt or a dress. And I tried. And my grandma took me to the DA and I picked out my skirts and I tried one on and it felt like the whole world collapsed on me. So needless to say I didn't go to my cousins farewell. And since then ive just started to understand how deeply those years of suppression affected my confidence in my ways of thinking. (Liam)

In this instance, outsider reaction, or fear of outsider reaction, led to a period of identity repression and an eventual second "explosion" of identity.

These narratives point to the varied ways in which respondents experienced the critical moment of identity self-awareness for the first time. For some, it was like turning on a light switch while for other it represented not so much a change in personage as a change in terminology. Whatever the reasoning behind it, these

moments typically had the effect of sparking the respondent to consider some kind of identity transition. These transition narratives will be explored in the next section.

*Narratives of Identity Transition, or “God didn’t fix me, but a surgeon in Bangkok did”*

For most of the respondents in my sample, they either have, or are currently, experiencing some kind of identity transition phase. After realizing one’s gender non-conforming identity, this stage represents some kind of a change, usually not only in self-perception but also in social presentation. Biological changes, such as those induced by hormones or experienced by therapy, as well as social changes, such as changing one’s name or pronoun preference, were common experiences for many respondents. This stage also represented a time in their lives when their identity was often in flux and greater ambiguity, both internally and from others, was tolerated.

One overarching theme for many respondents was that some people, especially non-parental figures, were not surprised when they announced their desire to transition. Responses of “yeah, I’ve known since I met you, you just didn’t say so” and “well what took you so long?” were not uncommon among friends and siblings. One respondent’s sister upon finding out of her then-sister’s desire to transition said “I have always thought of you as my brother. The only real announcement would be if you told me you suddenly wanted to be a girl!” That said, the routes to transition were quite varied. For some respondents transition involved biological changes such as hormones and surgery, and even those to varying degrees, while for others it involved only changes in presentation and lifestyle. Some respondents also saw their

transition as over while others saw it as only beginning and others still believed it would be a never-ending process – “I’ve spent my whole life coming out as something – first as a dyke, now as a man, and I’m sure tomorrow as something else!”. These varying patterns and ideas of what it means to transition will help further our understanding of what it means, or what it takes, to transition official identity for some trans people.

Kelly’s story is, in many ways, a sort of quintessential trans narrative – he was very unhappy as man but has found completeness as a woman. “[Since transitioning] my whole life has come together. I used to rent, now I own. I used to have low esteem, now I don’t. I used to be a prick, now I’m not”. Kelly started taking hormones in her early 30’s and started the necessary steps to be able to get sex reassignment surgery (SRS) almost immediately<sup>37</sup>. As soon as she was able, she booked a ticket to Thailand where she had the surgery done (it is not only cheaper there but they are also renowned for having some of the best SRS surgeons in the world). In a humorous, yet telling way, she notes that, “God didn’t fix me, but a surgeon in Bangkok did”. She has now been living as a biological woman for over a decade – “all my girly parts work and my breasts can go tit for tit with any 20 year old!”.

Mary’s story mirrors that of Kelly in many ways – she was unhappy as man, had surgery and takes hormones to biologically transition, and now is happier than she ever remembers being. One key difference between Mary and Kelly, however, is

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<sup>37</sup> These steps vary slightly by state and also whether sex assigned at birth was male or female (it is generally more difficult if born male) but in all cases involve an official diagnosis from a psychiatrist of Gender Identity Disorder (GID) and quite a bit of time spent in therapy, living as the target gender, and a letter from a therapist and medical doctor.

that while Kelly's wife was not accepting of her transition, Mary's wife has been her biggest supporter. "I couldn't have done this without her," she states. In fact, it was Mary's wife, who previously and still does identify as a heterosexual woman, who taught her everything she says she needed to be "the perfect passable woman".

Although surgery was the preferred option for many of the respondents assigned male at birth, it was a less desirable option for many of the respondents assigned female at birth. The two most common reasons cited were the prohibitive cost (anywhere from \$50,000 or more) and that the procedure is still far from being perfected, often leaving those who elect to have it disfigured and dysfunctional – "I'd have something, but it wouldn't be penis" noted one respondent. Hormones, however, did seem a reasonable choice for many respondents.

Nero was often read as a male even before he started taking hormones. "When I was in junior high, people would just assume I was a guy and I just never really contradicted them", he states. Often, however, was not enough for Nero and so he began taking hormones about a year ago. He says his body started to change as soon as he started taking them – "as far as hormones, your body is super simple. So if you switch to testosterone your body is just like 'oh that's what's supposed to be in here? Let's go with it'". He says he hasn't been read as a female in over six months now, mainly because his voice dropped significantly – "mannerisms were not a big transition for me, I always acted like a guy. But I had this really high pitched voice so sometimes people just didn't know what I was. Now that I'm on T [testosterone], I'm pretty much only ever read as a guy. I pass now, that's the thing".

Hormones, although a long awaited godsend for some, can also be jarring to those who are not fully prepared for their effects. Adain thought about hormones for over a year before they started taking them. They had previously presented as a female – “although I was kind of a dykey female” – but decided that they wanted a more ambiguous self-presentation. About a month into taking testosterone their voice had already lowered enough that it freaked them out – “I mean I wanted to change, but I guess I just didn’t want to change that fast”. They stopped taking them for over a year but recently started again. They are not sure how long they will continue taking them as they now gets read only as a boy, something they are not sure they are totally comfortable with – “I enjoyed being read as ambiguous but now everybody just thinks I’m a guy. That just feels...well...no offense but being read as a boy is just something really weird to me. I’m not really sure how I feel about that yet”.

For some, like Ryan, hormones are not used for transition but more for balance. Ryan recently discovered through genetic testing that he is, in fact, intersexed. He was prompted to look into this by his girlfriend who noted that his genitalia was more like a small penis than an large clitoris. He said it didn’t come as much of a surprise to him as he had always had sort of a male body and had been able to grow a beard since middle school – “I was the only dude in middle school with a full on mountain man beard AND I had a vagina”. Since diagnosis, the doctor suggested that Ryan, who has lived and presented as male most of his life, start taking testosterone to help balance his hormones. For him, testosterone is not a way to transition identities but rather a way to confirm his pre-existing one.

Jamie presents another case of someone who takes hormones for balance rather than transition. Jamie has presented as ambiguous or male most of his life, although he has never wanted to biologically be a boy – “I have never wanted to be a boy. They smell bad and have acne. The last thing on earth I ever wanted was to be a boy”. He also does not associate with the trans community so much as the missing limb community. This is a community of people who, even after losing a limb or never have been born with one, still mentally feel its presence. He says this is the way he feels about his body – that he is missing a penis, even though he doesn’t actually want one. He finds that testosterone eases this psychological distress and “puts my mental map back in order”. It is interesting to note that in order to gain access to these hormones, Jamie has to pretend that he is suffering psychological distress not from missing limb but rather from gender dysphoria. He states:

the narrative gets exemplified because you have to parrot it to gain access to health. So I’ve had to parrot the crap out of it because you start to learn that if you say anything but that, you won’t get access to hormones and crap. But there is no way in hell I would ever tell a hormone doctor what I just told you. If I did, I wouldn’t have access to treatment. (Jamie)

Some respondents have no desire for surgery or hormones, either for transition or balance, but rather focus only on presentation as their means of transition. Pamela is a 35 year old “female-identified person with a penis”. She has no desire to alter her body biologically in any way – “I’m happy with what God gave me,” she proclaims. For her, being trans is about presenting and living as a woman, not making changes to the way “you were actually born”. To this end, even though she uses a female name and presents as a female, she does not want to change her name or take “any of that gender reassignment bio-hormonal stuff”. She insists that while some see her simply

as a drag queen or a cross-dresser, that her trans identity is about much more than that.

I've been both [a drag queen and a cross-dresser] but this is different. This is full-time. This is real life. This isn't about a show or a fetish, this is about being who I am on and off of a stage and in and out of the bedroom. (Pamela)

As these narratives demonstrate, strategies of transition, as well as what transition even means, varied among respondents. While some saw lifestyle and presentation as a transition others desired hormones or surgery to feel more complete. In the next section, I will explore how those respondents who felt they were through their transitions have come to think of themselves.

#### *Discourse Analysis of the "Other Side", or "one flew over the gendo-sphere"*

Although some of my respondents still consider themselves in a state of transition (and one with "another side" yet to be reached), others feel they have already reached their target gender. These respondents often experience a different state of identity than they did when they were transitioning. For many of these respondents, this identity is not quite what they expected and they experience conflict as a result of what they see as "dueling identities". These respondents, typically with fewer years spent in identity transition, still feel a sense of their old identity while simultaneously taking on their new one. For others, although happier now, adjusting to how to navigate the world with their new gender identity is tougher than they expected. Often these respondents went through a phase of gender ambiguity or queerness only to emerge as members of the binary which they once felt so confining.



Casey, who started transitioning a little over a year ago, still feels torn by what he expresses as his rational understanding of self and his emotional one.

Logic tells me that I'm a lesbian because, you know, I'm still, I mean, I'll always genetically be a female and legally I'm still female but I do feel like a straight male. I see myself as a male. I present as a male. There's only a few people who still identify me as a female but they are people I've known for a while and they can use my legal name or my preferred male name. But like at my job or whatever they treat me as a male and use my male name.

(Casey)

Casey's experience is typical of other respondents at their earlier stages of transition.

Mary, who has identified as female for over a decade, expressed similar conflict about her early years in transition – “when I was younger I didn't know if I was male, or female, or shemale, or what I was. I mean I always sort of knew I wasn't male but it took me a while to accept that I was fully female”. As the narratives of other respondents will show, this sort of ambiguity about one's identity seems to fade the more years one spends adapting to their new preferred identity.

Adain started their transition only a few years ago and although less conflicted about their identity than Casey, still seems to have an identity very much in flux. They define their sexual identity as queer because, “gay, lesbian bi labels don't really fit me. My gender identity and sexual identity fluctuate so much they don't really work”. They go on to say that “it's weird because male pronouns don't really fit me but consistent female pronouns also make me uncomfortable. I use 'they' a lot even though people say it's not grammatically correct”. Perhaps most expressive of their fluctuating identity is their self-identity as queer, which they defines by saying:

It really just means whatever I want it to mean depending on the day so depending on the clothes I wear, the haircut I have, who I'm dating, how I interact with that person, how I have sex with people, how I let people touch me, it's all a very fluid identity expression,

sexuality. Being queer just means...I don't know...that I just do whatever I want. (Adain)

Although it is possible that this is a target identity for Adain, one of extreme flexibility, their responses seem more indicative of a transition not yet solidified. They even confess that given their new identity and the ways they present it still makes them feel “weird” and that they are not yet sure how to navigate it.

Miguel transitioned to being male six years ago. Since then, he has had difficulty navigating this new identity as being once again a member of the gender binary, albeit a member of the “other side”.

once I had my surgery, and I really looked like a guy, and was recognized as a guy everywhere, things just got different....all of a sudden I was straight. I was a guy. And I knew the highlight of all the male privilege that I can remember being so against. (Miguel)

His clearest moment of revelation of this new found binary identity came one day at work when his one of his co-workers approached him in the lunchroom.

I can remember eating my lunch and it was white rice and vegetables on the side and one of my coworkers comes in and just stops and says ‘what, your wife doesn’t cook for you?’. I just remember thinking ‘wow. How many things are wrong with this statement’. (Miguel)

Although previously very active in the trans community, he also suddenly experienced difficulty fitting in to his former social groups. Many people in the trans community, especially new members who didn’t know him before, did not read him as “trans enough”. He said he had to stop engaging so much with this community because people would be confused by his presence at trans events, “and I just thought – but I’m trans! I belong here!”. The “success” of his transition ended up leaving him isolated from both his former and his new community. He has been rejected in part by the trans community and has no desire to be a member of the straight male

community – “I think a lot of straight guys are assholes and I don’t really want to be like them anyway”. He says that he now feels invisible but also, secure in his identity, doesn’t feel the need to advertise his biological past – “nobody sees me. It’s really weird. I feel like I’m hiding but I’m not hiding. Do I need to wear a gay symbol all over the place just so I can fit in? I don’t really want to do that.” This experience of having to come out in a sense is new to him. “I’ve never had to come out before because I’ve always been very obvious. I just didn’t expect how difficult it was going to be.” Although still troubled by this ironic ambiguity, he has recently begun to care less and less about this identity and how he is read.

now at this point I guess I just don’t care. I don’t think as much about what my identity is because for a couple of years there it was all about my identity. I used to be worried about being read as straight rather than queer but I guess I just don’t care anymore. Eventually you just get used to it I guess. (Miguel)

Jamie has identified as androgynous for his entire life. He said he also been addressed by male and female pronouns and has always answered to both. When asked about his experience of really realizing he was gender non-conforming, he stated, “my identity was the same before and after and remains so.” A couple of years ago Jamie started taking testosterone, not to transition, but because doing so makes him feel more mentally, not physically, complete. A side effect of this mental completeness, however, has been physical changes that have caused him to be read more as a male and less as androgynous. This presentation as more clearly a member of a defined gender has left him not so much reflexive of his identity as it has reflexive of how to navigate certain binary gender roles.

One of the privileges of androgyny is that you can’t be filtered through stereotypes. People have to stop and think for a minute. Like, “do I hold the door for him?”, instead of just like boy, here’s

script, girl, here's script. Which I didn't either [think about] until I transitioned...now I'm starting to evaluate my environment and the gender identities present". (Jamie)

He says he is learning that you can say and do certain things with an androgynous presentation that you can't do with a more clearly defined gender presentation.

I used to wear buttons that said 'I love porn' and 'I like chicks with big tits' and it opened dialogue. Now that I'm perceived as male I can't wear them anymore because it would be seen as perverted. (Jamie)

Despite this new found dilemma of learning social scripts, Jamie still feels very proud to be a woman, even if his presentation is male – "I am a woman. I am an awesome woman. I am a strong woman. I am part of the diversity of women".

Similar to Jamie, Kelly is also proud to be a woman, although for her navigating social gender scripts has been more a game of taking non-traditional routes than opting for pre-scripted ones. Her story perhaps best exemplifies the case of someone who feels that they have transitioned fully to what she calls "the other side of the gendo-sphere". She now totally disidentifies not only with her previous gender but with many aspects of her previous life. "I left whiteness. And I left Mormonness. And I left maleness," she states. As the parent of six children, she even left her role of father stating, "they don't really see me as dad, and that is good. And they don't really see me as mom, and that is OK too. It's more like I'm an aunt who just knows everything about them." This non-traditional role is also found in her identity as a two-spirit, a Native American tradition of a person encompassing of both a male and a female spirit. Kelly feels complete in her transition and expresses a clear sense that her identity, and her life, are now radically different than before – "why can't my

family see how happy I am and how complete I am now? I never would have had the blessings that I have if I would have stayed in that other life”.

The stories of Casey and Adain point to the types of internal conflicts and fluctuations that can come from transitioning identities. Jamie and Miguel, on the other hand, present clear cases of how one can be secure in one’s own identity and still struggle with social roles imposed by society. “The conflict is really external, not internal,” as Jamie put it. And the story of Kelly points to how one can successfully resolve both conflicts. In the next section, I will explore how respondents viewed the potential future trajectory of their identities.

#### *Future Trajectories, or “oh you’re trans? So is everybody else!”*

Although many respondents, particularly those discussed in the previous section, felt their identities were well into a state of transition, others were still waiting for certain aspects of their transition to begin. The chief inhibitor to feeling a full sense of identity transition for most respondents was the financial barrier to obtaining hormones or surgery. For others, it was simply a desire not to want to transition at all, even though they identified as gender non-conformists.

Liam has been homeless for several years now. Although employed, he does not make enough money to be able to afford housing much less the often expensive therapy required before being able to get a prescription for hormones. When asked about where he sees his gender identity headed in the future, he responded that he was unsure:

...because so much of it kind of hinges on my financial and living situation and that in itself is unpredictable so I don’t know. In

general, I'd like to reach a more stable situation, including with my gender identity, so that's the primary reason I want to go through SRS [sex reassignment surgery] and hormone treatment. (Liam)

The barrier to Liam is not confusion or lack of desire, but rather a lack of financial resources.

Unlike Liam, Ryan feels that his identity is at a stable point. That said, he also notes that "biologically there are still things I still want to accomplish in my transition". For Ryan, the stability of his identity is not bound up in the biological, but various identity goals are. Although he is currently on hormones, he is still saving up to be able to afford top surgery (a mastectomy) to appear less female. He has also considered a metoidioplasty (a freeing of the testosterone enlarged clitoris from the labia) but feels that that is way off as he says the procedure can cost "more god damned money than I make in a year".

Nero, like Liam, feels comfortable in his identity although he, too, has hopes for surgery once his economic situation permits. "I want top surgery for sure, but bottom surgery might have to wait unless they come up with something better in my lifetime". He does feel some distress that testosterone is a lifetime commitment – once you stop taking it, the body will revert to making estrogen – so he states that, "I would also like to have a hysterectomy so that doesn't happen....and so I can lower the amount of T [testosterone] I have to take". "Until then," he states, "I'm just going to keep doing what I'm doing".

Although most respondents indicated a desire to take hormones or to have surgery to help them feel more complete in their transition this was not the case for everyone. Pamela, a 35 year old self-identified female, says "I don't know what tomorrow brings and I'm not going to talk about that but for the moment I don't want

hormones or surgery”. She says that she lives every day as a woman and that is good enough for her. She sees no need to change her body or mess with “the legality of who I really am”. She goes on to say that “I don’t need biology to tell me who I am and I don’t really see that coming in a bottle or on some operating table anyway”. For her, being female is not about hormones, either biologically produced or injected, but rather about presentation and her own everyday lived experiences. That said, Pamela would like to see society change in a way that allows her a more comfortable expression of her identity. She says she presents who and how she is “regardless of what anybody else has to say about it” but that she would like to see society move in a direction that is more welcoming and receptive of alternative genders and so works “everyday to let people know I am, to let them see me and to educate people on the idea that I am just a normal person too”.

Like Pamela, Miguel also wants to live in a society that is more accepting of alternative genders. His solution, however, isn’t education per se (although he is still very active in leading workshops and organizing conferences on trans issues), but rather geographic. When asked about his future identity trajectory he replied simply, “that’s easy. Move.” His plan is to save up some money and then move to San Francisco, where he says “people just look at you and are like ‘oh, you’re trans? Big deal. Who cares? So is everybody else!’”. He feels that living in that kind of environment won’t help him develop his identity per se but that it would be a more comfortable environment in which to live.

The main opposition for many respondents to furthering their identity goals is financial. Being trans, it turns out, is not cheap. The often prohibitive costs of the

lengthy and extensive therapy required before hormones or surgery can be prescribed, to say nothing of the costs of those things themselves, is enough to prevent many individuals from realizing what they see as the full potential of their desired identity. For others, however, their identity goals are not tied to biological changes but rather to social or geographic ones. They feel that transforming society, or moving to a society that they feel is already transformed, is the next step in their identity trajectory. In the next section, I will begin to explore some of these more structural factors related to trans identity and begin to more fully explore how the life course of trans individuals is affected by their social surroundings, legal standing, and cohort effects.

### Constructing Selves in Structured Contexts: Structural Constraints and Enablers of Identity Development

Overarching the more inter-intra-personal aspects of identity development are a number of structural constraints and enablers. The socio-structural effects of the social and physical space that respondents inhabit, their legal standing and ability to change their legal standing, and the impact of the evolving nature of their historical settings, were all powerful influences on their identity development. I will discuss each of these, in turn, in order to better contextualize the life course trajectories discussed above within a larger social framework.



*The Socio-structural Effects of Physical and Social Space, or “beware: we walk among you”*

The physical and social place where one is geographically situated can have a profound influence on how, and when, one’s identities are expressed. This situation becomes even more complicated when one is in the midst of an identity transition, or navigating toward an identity for which there is no clearly pre-established social script. As one respondent noted, “I knew how to be a girl and I know how to be a man but I just never figured out how to be a trans.” Many everyday situations that are taken for granted by those whose identity falls comfortably within the societally mandated gender binary – like going to the dentist’s office or even just to the bathroom – can become experiences that cause high levels of identity self-reflection for many trans people. In this section, I will discuss how the physical and social spaces navigated by my respondents impacted their identity expression.

Before delving too heavily into the particular experiences of my respondents, I would like to take a step back and discuss the importance of passing. Passing, or the ability to be perceived by others in society as a particular type of person, was a theme reiterated again and again by respondents. Moments of passing were particularly important because they were when respondents received the most social feedback of life in their new identities. It was also cited as a common marker for feeling one had successfully transitioned as well as a sign of distress for those who were not sure how to present in this new identity. Overall, however, the ability to not be seen as trans, or to be “stealth” as the insider terminology goes, was seen as a positive and desirable achievement.

The concept of passing becomes particularly important when discussing the effects of social and physical space on identity because, unlike legal standing or cohort effects, this dimension of structural effect is the one most influenced by the reactions of others. In other words, it is in certain spaces that one experiences certain kinds of social feedback, be it hostility, harassment, confusion, or acceptance. For this reason, the structural influence of space is one that can provoke repeating moments of self-reflexivity, particularly when one's goal is to pass. As one respondent said, "we walk among you", and the ability or failure to be able to do so can be shaped heavily by one's social surroundings.

Liam is a biological female who has a target identity of male. His presentation is ambiguous at best and although he is not immediately obvious as either boy or girl, nor is he immediately obvious as either boy or girl. In other words, his ambiguity is both a source of distress in certain situations as he is not read as he would like to be (i.e. as a male) but can also be a source of safety as he is not read as he might not like to be (i.e. as a female attempting to pass as a male). At work, for example, Liam uses his birth given female name so that his boss can connect him with the person on the paperwork and "so I can get my paycheck". When in spaces frequented by the LGBT community, however, he prefers to present as male or trans.

I'm a little more comfortable to be more flexible than I am just personally or outside the community. I don't feel like any particular pressure to identify one way..well..I guess I do...I feel more comfortable identifying as trans in the LGBT community. But maybe that's a political thing rather than a personal thing. I guess I just assume they will want me to be more political so I present that identity when I'm at like [a local gay establishment] because I guess that is what they are expecting to see and I don't do that at work because I guess I assume they just don't really want to see that side of me. (Liam)

As this quote illustrates, Liam changes his identity depending on where he is and who is around in order to not stand out and to find acceptance. He uses the assumed social expectations of others in the space around him as a guide to how he will present himself.

Casey, a 20 year old Hispanic male who was born female, also uses social expectations to guide his identity presentation although he seems more conflicted about doing so. Casey's mother owns a chain of businesses in the large metropolitan area where he grew up. When he returns home, his mother will not permit him to present as male if he visits any of those businesses "because she says these are people who have known her for ten years and she is afraid it will hurt her career if they find out her daughter is now a son." She also prefers that he not go out of the house when he is home for fear the neighbors will find out "but I always tell her like 'mom, they have seen me coming and going'. And I know they must know because every time I go home I'm like a little bit different each time". He still tries to respect his mother's wishes and while he doesn't confine himself to his house when he goes home, he does try to at least pass. "So I guess I'm like a guy here in [state] and a...well..whatever I am back in [state]".

Jamie was perceived as ambiguous all of his life until he recently started taking hormones and is now perceived much more often as male. As mentioned before, he takes the hormones not to transition physically but because he finds it helps put together his own mental map of who he is. He is still proud to be "part of the diversity of women" and has "no desire to be a boy". That said, his presentation as male, and the social reactions of others to him as a male, have caused him

unwelcomed moments of having to be overly self-reflexive and often go with a non-preferred identity. One particularly distressing moment is when having to use the restroom in public. He recalls a particular time when he was using the bathroom at a local restaurant and an incident occurred.

I just had to go pee you know so I went into the women's restroom. This was back in the earlier days of me taking hormones like a year or so ago and I didn't really realize that EVERYBODY was not reading me as male. So when I walked into the women's bathroom this woman in there started yelling at me and calling me a pervert and telling me to get out or whatever. Well I just ignored her and did my thing and went back to eat. And when I did the manager came over to my table and told me that I had to leave because he had called the cops and that he didn't allow perts in his restaurant....I thought for a minute about waiting for the cops to show up but then figured it was probably best if I just left.....And since then I haven't been to the bathroom in public. (Jamie)

For Jamie, the choice of which restroom to use is clear – the women's. For those around him, however, his choice is not as so easily accepted. Jamie's response, therefore, is to avoid the social places that cause him identity distress.

Pamela was born a male but lives her life as a female. Her ability to pass, however, is minimal as she herself confesses – “yeah, of course I know that people know. But I don't care. I consider it part of my mission to educate people and I can't educate people if they don't even know I'm here”. She also sees using the bathroom as a pivotal moment when her identity expression is particularly noticed by others.

Everyone always watches me when I go to the bathroom. It's like 'is he going to go to the men's room or is he going to go to the women's room?'. Well I always end up going to the women's room. Although I sometimes still get funny looks for that, even from people who know me”.

Unlike Jamie, however, Pamela has not stopped going to the restroom in public because of other's reactions. She states, “yeah sometimes I still get

called a faggot or whatever but it's like what are they going to do? I'm 6'3".

It's not like they're going to beat me up."

As these narratives indicate, the physical and social space that one occupies can have a profound effect on which identity comes to be expressed. Although this is no doubt the case for everyone in society, people whose identities are transitioning or who are experiencing a new identity for the first time, have to be particularly self-aware of how their identity expression will be read and the kinds of reactions it might elicit from others. In the next section, I will explore another structural dimension to identity expression, that of legal standing, and the role paperwork can have on one's sense of how they understand their own identity.

*Legal Frameworks and the Structural Motivations for Identity Congruence, or "I'm federally female, but locally male"*

Trans people face a particularly interesting dilemma when it comes to their legal identity versus their desired or presented identity. Just as their birth sex and current gender identity do not always fall into line, for many trans people, nor do their legal standing and social presentation always line up either. Most respondents saw life where their legal identity and their socially presented identity as congruent to be a goal. The reasons for this desired congruency, however, present a complicated story of the often taken-for-granted benefits of having identity alignment. For some respondents, the goal was the convenience of having a legal name or picture on a piece of legal identification that match their social presentation. For others, their identity shifted based on the claims they could then stake to certain resources. And,

for others, it was the desire to obtain a particular legal standing that motivated their desire to become identity congruent.

Adain, who as previously mentioned appears to still be in a state of identity ambiguity and inner conflict, was born a biological female and says they have no desire to be anything else. They did, however, change the spelling of their name to a more gender neutral form. They also tell the story of leaving their gym membership blank “so they can just fill it in however they want. I’m sure they put male but I don’t really care. I just didn’t want to put female down and then have to explain anything”. Adain goes on to explain that “On federal forms my gender marker is female. I don’t plan to change it. I really like it. I don’t ever want to be an ‘M’”. They do note, however, that they would be open to changing their gender marker in the future for kids – “I want kids someday but would only do that if both me and my partner had legal rights over the kids. That would be the only reason I would ever change my marker to ‘M’”. Adain presents a case where the structure does not currently limit their ability to express their current gender identity but they already anticipate instances where it might in the future.

For some respondents there still exists a gulf between their desired legal identity and their social presentation. Casey, who was born Christine, states, “I’m seen as male in just about every aspect except the legal one”. One reason that Christine chose Casey as a preferred name was because both began the first letter “C” and so he could still sign things as “C.” for his first name. “So I’m not lying, I’m just not telling them what the “C” stands for”. As he is relatively early in his transition this has yet to cause him any serious problems although he is already aware that this

situation will likely have to be addressed in the near future – “I already know I’m going to have to do something about that, and probably sooner rather than later would be better”.

Ryan, who sports a full beard, often wears flannel, works as an auto mechanic, and has a very deep gruff voice, is never read as female even though he still has a vagina. He always checks male rather than female (unless trans is an option in which case he very openly identifies as that) which is aided in part by the fact that his license says he is male. Unlike other respondents, however, he never had to go through a legal name change to have his sex marker changed. Instead, it was a “mistake” made by people at the license branch. “I just like left that box blank and when I got my license back it had a big M on there and I was like ‘Oh cool! This shit says I’m a real boy!’”. He has since been able to use his license to obtain status of male on other forms of identification like his ID at work and even his insurance registration. In this case, the convincing nature of someone’s social presentation alone was able to modify their legal standing.

Jamie, who expressed comfort and almost disinterest, in being read as however people chose to read him, had a legal name and sex change (though not an operation) for convenience. The impetus came when he would attempt to use his debit card and people would reject it because it had a female name and was being presented by a person who appeared to be male. To resolve this, Jamie had his name as well as his gender marker changed on his driver’s license. “I had to switch it because I would try to use my debit card and people would reject me because they perceived me as female. So I’m like whatever. Now I’m an ‘M’. That’s cool. It means about as much

as a ‘W’’. One complication, and an example of how structure can both enable and constrain, is that Jamie was only able to change his name and gender marker on local forms of identification. In order to do so in the district where he lives all that was required was to present a letter from a therapist saying he is living as a male and to pay a small fee to change his name. On the federal level, however, surgery is required in order to change one’s gender marker “so on FAFSA and stuff, I’m female. I am federally female and locally male”. This incongruity can add further complications as, for instance, when Jamie recently received two voting registration forms – one with his birth given name and him listed as a female and the other with his legal name change and him listed as a male. This case illustrates how problems can result not just from the incongruity of the person’s legal and social identity, but also from structural incongruities as well.

Miguel does not experience identity incongruence in the traditional sense. Although he was born female, he is now legally, socially, and biologically male. He presents as male, his local and federal identification both say that he is male, and he has had a double mastectomy, a hysterectomy, and a metoidioplasty (essentially turning his clitoris into a penis). For all the reasons that society might measure maleness, he is male. Ironically, this congruence brings him distress on occasions where he wants to obtain resources not allotted to maleness and so he identifies as something else instead. One example of this is that he still identifies as trans with the local LGBT center in order to help them get access to resources.

A lot of grants at [LGBT center] revolve around who uses stuff so I used to sign in and not know what to put. Now I just put trans because I know they can get more trans resources if more trans people USE their resources.....so I find myself a lot of times I just



put whatever I think they need me to put because its whatever....its ironic, you know, I spent all this time trying not to be trans and now I identify that way just to get more resources. It's all an identity game I guess. (Miguel)

As Miguel notes, for many trans people identity is often a type of game, one where the larger social structure sets the rules but at the same time opens loopholes for their violation. Respondents were motivated to change their legal standing based on reasons of a desired identity congruence for convenience, by accident, or to obtain resources. In each case the structure both presented the obstacle as well as the means for overcoming it. Social structures, however, are not static and as the next section will show, the historical setting can also have a profound influence on how one's identity is developed and understood.

*The Impact of the Evolving Nature of Socially Constructed Historical Settings on Identity Formation and Expression, or "I knew Chaz way back when he was just Chastity"*

Historical effects are an important factor to examine and interviews with my trans respondents showed that two key recent phenomenon in particular were prominent in the construction of their identity – the internet and the emergence of trans celebrities. The internet was used to explore identities in private and the emergence of celebrities meant an only relatively recent emergence of knowledge of their identities to the public mind. Trans issues and trans awareness are still no doubt in their formative societal stages. Although trans issues have blipped on the social radar at various historical moments, only recently have they come to have a sustained and growing, albeit still very minute, presence. Increasing references to trans people

and issues have begun to appear more regularly on television, in movies, and in the popular press. This emergence into the social imaginary has, to varying degrees, had an impact on trans people themselves as for the first time they have encountered ways to find information, role models, and a growing social tolerance, if not acceptance. The two most important historical impacts on the respondents I interviewed were the emergence of the internet and the appearance of trans identified celebrities.

The internet has had a profound impact of many aspects of society but it has served a particularly powerful purpose for those who have used it for identity exploration. Such was the case for many respondents who used it to find out more about trans identities as well as to connect with other trans people, both near and far. As one respondent noted, “I think the internet is something that helped me out a lot. I did know that my gender identity was different. And that it was awesome. I just didn’t really know what it was”.

Liam first came out to someone else as trans while playing a multi-player role playing game online. He had made several friends playing the game and one day told one of them that he was, in fact, not biologically male even though his character presented that way. This virtual experience, followed by several others:

...let me kind of practice in a more safe environment before having to do it in real life. I mean, if they rejected me then I could just click the “x” and they were gone from my life. But I can’t just click an “x” on people in real life and make them go away. (Liam)

The internet also allowed Mary to first come out, albeit to herself rather than to others. Mary, who was born a biological male and at the time of first exploration into trans issues was married to a woman, never felt quite right in her male body. She did not, however, have any desire to be with other men and considered herself fully

heterosexual (and still does). Still, she knew that something about her gender identity was not quite as it should be. Growing up in the 60's and 70's, Mary was familiar with the terms 'cross-dresser' and 'transvestite' but not with the term 'transgender'.

So I started to look those things [cross-dresser and transvestite] up on-line ya know. I just went with what I knew. And then, thank god, I came across the term 'transgender' and it was like this big light bulb just went off in my head. I knew right away that's what I was. (Mary)

For Mary, the internet allowed her to finally put a name to the feelings she had been having for most of her life.

Kelly had a similar experience of identity discovery thanks to the internet.

Kelly had also been married and even had six children, at the time she first discovered what transgender was and meant. Prior to the internet she would search the library for terms but none of them seemed to quite fit her. Then, once she was able to get online, she found an AOL chat room for transgender women and began her transition immediately.

The recent historical timeline has relatively few instances of openly identified trans celebrities. The first trans celebrity of sorts came in 1952 when Christine Jorgensen, who was widely, although falsely, claimed to be the first recipient of sex reassignment surgery<sup>38</sup>, returned to the United States after her surgery in Denmark. Christine went on to become a leading celebrity of the day, although her fame was more of an oddity than one based on talent or achievement<sup>39</sup>. Billy Tipton, a mid-

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<sup>38</sup> The first documented sex reassignment surgery was actually that of Dora Richter and performed in 1931.

<sup>39</sup> According to Stryker (2008), "In a year when hydrogen bombs were being tested in the Pacific, war was raging in Korea, England crowned a new queen, and Jonas Salk invented the polio vaccine, Jorgense was the most written-about topic in the media" (47). For more on the story of Christine Jorgensen see Meyerowitz (2002).

century jazz musician, was also trans, although his identity as such was not revealed until after his death in 1989. Alexis Arquette, one of the sisters of the famous Arquette acting family, is also openly trans although as she is given to play mostly trans roles her impact on awareness has been minimal. The celebrity with the greatest impact in recent years has been Chaz Bono. Chaz, formerly Chastity, had been an out lesbian for some time although it was attention to his transition from female to male that has gained more media attention than any previous trans celebrity (owing, no doubt, to the fact that he is the now-son of Cher). For this reason, or perhaps because of its recency, the impact of Chaz Bono was a common theme mentioned among respondents.

Casey is only 20 years old and the youngest of my respondents. He is also the one who felt the most impacted by the emergence of trans celebrity.

I think seeing that it's becoming a more open issue and that it does actually exist is a good thing. That there are people out there. And you are seeing more people being openly transgender. I think it's affected me in the sense that I'm able to be more open about it. It's still in the early phases of being socially acceptable and people are seeing that there are people out there. It's becoming prominent in the US. More prominent I should say. Whereas I look back 5 or 6 years ago I wouldn't have been open about it but now I feel OK with it. (Casey)

He went on to explain how Chaz, in particular, had impacted him. "I mean I don't really like Cher or whatever but I think it's really cool how this guy who is the son of such a big celebrity came out in the open about being trans. And I guess it was kind of Cher's response to that that helped me come out to my own mother."

The appearance of celebrity helped some respondents in a very direct way, and others, in a very indirect way. Liam, for example, doesn't feel like celebrity role models were necessary for his self-awareness as trans but he does think that their

presence is making it easier for him to be trans now. Speaking about the recent and sudden attention given to trans issues, he said:

I guess it's like most controversial or sensational issues – it changed a few minds here and there but also just kind of solidified the polarity. Like people who were already inclined to oppose people with trans identities and didn't know about trans people probably didn't have their minds changed. They probably just oppose people with trans identities. But I'd like to think there were maybe a few fence sitters who were maybe impressed by Cher's response or Cher's support of Chaz or impressed by Chaz's openness about it and sincerity about it. I'd like to think that's the case at least. (Liam)

In this way he feels that “Chaz has kind of made it more trans friendly. Like at least I have a reference point now to explain myself to people.”

For some respondents, they do not feel that the growing attention to trans issues in the media has had any impact on them, either directly or indirectly, because they do not identify as trans themselves. Nero, who has never identified with the trans label, noted that “I'm not trans, I'm genderqueer so it doesn't really matter to me. I mean if somebody had come out as genderqueer then yeah maybe but someone coming out as trans really just doesn't affect me.” He does, however, go on to say that “it's nice to see the cogs are turning” and that society is becoming more accepting of alternative gender identities. “The point I guess is that it's progress. It hasn't really impacted me personally yet but it is progress.”

The age of first realizing trans-identity had a major impact on how respondents viewed recent increasing attention to trans issues in the media. Ryan, who has identified as trans since the mid 2000's said, “I mean I was trans before Chaz”. Jamie, who has identified as gender non-conforming his entire life, didn't

think that there was any particular increase in attention to trans issues lately, rather that it was now positive attention.

It's not about Brandon Teena [a trans murder victim and feature of the movie *Boys Don't Cry*] anymore, now it's about Chaz Bono. That's a big difference. But I don't really think it's any more or less, it's just the quality of the coverage that has changed, not the amount. (Jamie)

Kelly has identified as trans since the mid 1990's and since then has considered herself an activist of trans issues. She feels that what the trans community needs are more role models, but that they don't necessarily have to be famous to do that. Speaking of her early days in transition, she said:

A lot of people would just disappear from the community post surgery because if you identified as hetero after transition then you couldn't acknowledge your queer roots or you wouldn't get accepted. So I feel like nobody was there to help me. Nobody taught me to change my driver's license, to walk like a woman, to talk like a woman, and so I stayed around post surgery to help people out. To help them figure out how to do those things that nobody was there to teach me. (Kelly)

When asked about the emergence of trans issues and celebrities in recent years, Kelly noted, "I knew Chaz way back when he was just Chastity....I'd like to think that I helped make pop culture accepting of Gaga and people like Chaz. I'd like to think that I made them able to accept that".

### The Impact of Social Structure on the Life Course of Trans Individuals and its Relationship to Self-Identity on Official Surveys

This chapter demonstrated the impact of social structure on the life course of trans individuals and its relationship to self-identity on official surveys. I have previously shown the potentially powerful impacts that survey wording might have

on how respondents self-identify their gender identity and sexual identity with special attention to how this wording might affect trans individuals in particular. I also demonstrated how social structure both enables and constrains identity awareness and development for trans individuals throughout their life course. I will now draw these three arguments together to show the contribution of this dissertation to understanding how socially structured survey response options exist in a dialectic relationship to trans individuals self-narratives of their own life course trajectory.

The life course of every individual is impacted by social structure. Trans individuals are no different in that regard. Where they are different, however, is in the types of effects social structure has on their sense of identity awareness and development. Of particular interest to this dissertation is how this identity awareness and development then translates into how one identifies on official surveys. The answer, it turns out, has to do not only with the perceived purpose of the survey, but also with the location of the respondent in their own life course trajectory and how that has been impacted by the overarching social structure.

One example of how social structure can impact identity development and transition is the case of Ryan, a trans individual who currently identifies as male both personally and legally. He was, however, born a female and used to identify as such because “I didn’t always quite understand what box I fit into but now that I understand more of myself and what I fit into, I also put a little check right next to that male box”. He said the real turning point for this came when a misperception was made at the license branch that left him with a legal male identification. Since then, he has identified as male on all legal forms and surveys. “I would never put female

because I'm not one," he says. He does, however, check 'transgender' when that option is present "unless I feel there is some issue with safety". The problem, he says, is that "the trans option almost never fucking appears". For Ryan, the limitations of society – not having trans as an option – constrains his ideal identity choice but the loopholes of society – giving him a male identification – have left him with a way to identify as how he truly feels and lives his life.

For some respondents, like Liam and Casey, what they put on a survey depends on the social context and its perceived purpose. Both are legally still female but present as male in most contexts. There are, however, still situations where each presents as female and it is perhaps this inconsistency of presentation that helps make sense of why their survey responses are also context dependent. For both Liam and Casey, they put female on forms they perceive to be more legally binding and male on forms they feel are less official. Liam noted:

Anytime that I have to use my legal identity then I have to identify as female.....I mean government forms I feel I always have to use my legal identity there. As far as other surveys I almost always use my masculine identity because its more...other surveys are usually more personal. And don't necessarily have to relate to my legal identity so I feel no obligation to use it there. (Liam)

Casey echoes a similar response saying, "identifying as male or female depends on the context. For a research study I will identify as male. Anything associated with my social security number or having to show an ID, I put female because I am still legally female". The social situation and the perceived legality of purpose influence how each is willing to identify themselves.

The perceived legality of the survey also impacts how Adain, a self-identified genderqueer, indicates their identity – "It all depends how legal the document is. On



federal forms my gender marker is female, otherwise it's whatever I say it is". Unless there is an option to fill in their own response choice, Adain often just leaves the form blank "and let them fill in whatever it is they think I am". They say they do this because they are not really partial to labels "at this point in my transition" and so prefers not to be identified as anything, unless they can write in genderqueer because they feel that term can "mean whatever I want to mean".

For some respondents, identification is political as much as it is personal. They feel a political obligation to alert the system of their presence by refusing to simply check one of the limited options with which they feel they are presented. Jamie, who identifies neither as male nor as female but rather simply as 'Jamie', is one such respondent – "for surveys where its not going to be some big media frenzy thing I always write in my own thing and add things like intersex, other, transgender, and then circle transgender". He says although he does not explicitly identify as transgender he does feel that his actions help increase transgender awareness and that "my decision is definitely politically inspired". Interestingly, however, he does not engage in such political tactics on official forms and surveys – "on official forms where it's not cute or funny to do that, I put what I'm supposed to be. So on federal forms I put female and on local forms I put male". Since Jamie is legally male at the local level and legally female at the federal level, his compliance with enforced social norms ironically also presents a case where the social structure has presented an opportunity for raising awareness of difference. He is, in fact, both female and male depending on the institution asking the question.

Kelly, who is now anatomically (at least as measured by genitalia) and legally a female, considers herself to be a trans activist and someone whose very presence in society helps to raise awareness. She purposefully sets out to disrupt what she views as imposing social norms at every opportunity, including on federal forms. Her strategies for disruption vary from adding her own response options, to checking nothing, to checking everything, “depending on my mood and the point I’m trying to get across that day”. She says her reasons for doing so are clear – “I’m not either/or. I’m not both. I just don’t fit into your fucking boxes”.

As this dissertation has demonstrated, the ways in which people experience their life course as trans individuals is as much personal as it is political. Their own personal identity development, from first recognizing their own gender non-conformity, to transitioning, to life post transition are heavily impacted by the overarching social structure. The dialectic interplay of their own life course within the overarching social structure, including potential survey response options, impacts how their identity is structured and consequently identified on official surveys. In other words, it is not just that the trans life course can be used to help us make better sense of existing survey data and methodological concerns for capturing this population, but that existing survey methodologies and survey data can also help us make sense of how certain trans individuals socially construct their own identity formation narratives across the life course.

## Conclusions

As these narratives indicate, the socio-historic context in which respondents live their lives has a profound influence on their identity awareness and development, particularly in their access to knowledge and resources about gender non-conforming identities. Overall, we have seen how socio-structural effects of physical and social space, legal frameworks and the structural motivations for identity congruence, and the evolving nature of socially constructed historical settings on identity formation and expression, in various ways both enable and constrain trans identity awareness and development across the life course. In the conclusion, I will demonstrate how the potential effects of survey wording also impact this dynamic.

## Chapter VII: Implications for Determining Trans Status on Official Surveys: Lessons from Cognitive Interviewing and Life Course Analysis

The results from the previous three chapters can give us insight into how to better understand question design issues and survey results related to sexual minorities, and especially to the trans population. The findings from these chapters give us insight not only into current question design issues but also into how to better understand existing results and how to potentially improve both the way we ask as well as the ways we interpret the results of trans identity on surveys. I will now review findings from each chapter and then tie them all together to paint a better picture of how this research can be used to positively impact our understanding of sexual minority and trans status, particularly as they relate to official surveys.

My first research question - *How might survey wording affect sexual minority and non-minority respondents' choices of self-reported sexual identity and its consequent distribution on official surveys?*- began by drawing on a mixed method analysis of the existing sexual identity question used on the NSFG. This analysis was the starting point by which the QDRL at NCHS made suggestions for further improvements to the question. Three basic design principles were used as guidelines for the development of this new question – 1) use labels that respondents use to refer to themselves, 2) do not use labels that some respondents do not understand –

particularly if those labels are not required by any other group of respondents for understanding, and 3) use follow-up questions to meaningfully categorize those respondents answering ‘something else’ and ‘don’t know’.

Overall, analysis of the 139 cognitive interviews that were conducted led to at least four main conclusions that help address my research question. First, the absence of the word ‘heterosexual’ on the English language question is helpful to reduce response difficulty. It is important to use common vernacular in order to reduce conceptual confusion. Thus, while the absence of the term ‘heterosexual’ did not lead to any confusion among respondents in any demographic, its presence did.

Second, the presence of the word ‘heterosexual’ on the Spanish language question helps respondents make sense of other response categories. Since there is no conceptual translation for the word ‘straight’ in Spanish the presence of ‘heterosexual,’ a word more commonly used by Spanish speakers than English ones, is useful to provide context not only for this option but for the others as well.

Third, for many heterosexuals the concept of sexual identity is not salient. They do not so much identify with being heterosexual as they dis-identify with being gay. To this end, the addition of ‘that is, not gay’ was useful in helping these respondents select the optimal response category.

Fourth, due to the presence of the ‘not gay’ wording, it is necessary to put this response category lower than the ‘gay’ category. This is not only logically more correct, it also encourages respondents to more deeply consider previous response options.

Of particular interest to this dissertation are the ways in which the ‘something else’ response option was understood by respondents. Findings indicate that this response option was well understood by those who identified as something else. Many transgender respondents, for example, selected something else on the basis of their transgender identity. Several of the trans respondents noted that the first thing they looked for was a ‘transgender’ response option but when they did not find this option, these respondents then chose ‘something else’ assuming that that is what it meant. There were also respondents who identify as queer, do not use labels to identify themselves, and are asexual – all sub-options of the ‘something else’ response category - who were also able to accurately select this category as the one that best reflected their sexual identity.

Even many of the non-transgender respondents felt that ‘something else’ implied some variation of an understanding of transgender. One respondent, for example, said that something else is for those people who don’t know what they want to be – male or female – and that they have not found their sexuality yet. Another respondent felt that maybe it was for people who didn’t want to openly identify as gay or who were transgender or “lost” and don’t really know what they are. Others noted that it was a category for people who are not a lesbian or a homosexual. A gay male respondent said that “there are so many letters now” and so it gives people a chance to pick something different.

It is important to note that this question was asked within the context of other demographic questions. It is known from past research (Ridolfo, Miller, and Maitland 2012) that the context of a sexual identity question may impact the way respondents

interpret the question. For example, asking the question within the context of other questions about deviant behavior (alcohol use, drug use, criminal behavior) versus asking the question within the context of someone's sex, age, and height, will influence the respondent's interpretation of the question including, potentially, the social desirability of response.

My second research question - *How might survey wording affect transgender responses on official surveys?*- drew on a sub-set of 21 cognitive interviews done with trans identified people from the previous sample. One of the most common situations where questions (or response options) related to trans identity appear on national surveys, is in the context of a sexual identity question. One of the principle problems facing those trying to capture an accurate picture of the trans community through surveys is that many trans people themselves do not want to be counted as such. Previous research has shown, for example, that many trans respondents do not identify as such on official surveys but instead identify as a man when biologically a woman and also across the spectrum of sexuality (Xavier et. al. 2007). For some trans people, identifying as trans, would defeat what they have spent their whole lives trying to achieve, to be a member of the opposite sex and/or gender. In this way, for many trans individuals, being transgender is more of a process, a means to an end (of becoming the opposite sex and/or gender), than it is an end goal (of becoming transgender). It is not that they want to be trans but that they want to *transition* to another sex and/or gender. That said, there are still arguably a bedrock of common issues faced by trans people as a community that warrant some kind of official count so they can be more properly understood.

The findings in this dissertation examined the extent to which a newly suggested sexual identity question might be able to more accurately capture transgender respondents' sexual identity. In so doing, this question would have the potential to improve what we know about the sexual identity distribution among the trans population. It might also help us better understand how many trans people there are in the general population. Overall, my findings in the second results chapter confirmed those found in the first - the response option for 'something else' was well understood by those who identified as such. The 'something else' option was the one most frequently chosen by trans respondents, who then most frequently selected the trans sub-option in the follow-up question. Overall, the findings indicate that the presence of a trans category in the list of primary response options, however, would likely have a significant effect on how members of the trans community identify both their gender identity and especially their sexual identity on official surveys.

My third research question - *How can we understand the trans life course in a way that might enable us to make better sense of existing (and future) survey data on trans people?* - drew on 10 in-depth qualitative interviews to examine how the social construction of identity across the life course might help us make better sense of how to capture trans identity on official surveys as well as how to make better sense of existing data on trans identity. Findings from this chapter indicate that self-identity as trans seems to center around at least five key periods in the life course as they are shaped by social structure. The personal identity development of trans people, from first recognizing their own gender non-conformity, to transitioning, to life post transition are heavily impacted by the overarching social structure and factors like the



physical and social space they inhabit, their legal standing, and the historical moment in which they *currently* live as well as the cumulative experience of those in which they *have* lived. The interplay of their own life course within the overarching social structure impacts how their identity is structured. As shown in the previous chapter, this dialectic, in turn, impacts how they see themselves not just in their lived everyday experiences but on official surveys as well.

One contribution of this dissertation has been to enrich the literature on what we know about the trans population. The methodologies employed – cognitive interviewing and in-depth interviews – both contributed to developing a rich narrative of how trans individuals self-identify and how this self-identity shapes and shifts across the life course. Much of the literature in this area has either examined survey responses to particular questions or individual biographies of trans people, but this dissertation has brought those two areas together. I have shown how the relationship between survey responses and life course identity awareness and development exist in a dialectical relationship with each one having the potential to shape how the other is understood.

#### Implications for Determining Trans Status on Official Surveys

Trans is a socially constructed category and, as such, is open to reflexivity and change. In terms of self-identity, there is little to unite the various people who might be placed under the larger umbrella of the category of trans. Even gender non-conformity could not necessarily serve as a bedrock as many trans individuals identify in very gender conforming ways. For this reason, capturing such a broad and

indistinct identity is a particularly challenging proposition, but this dissertation has been one effort to move us closer to meeting this challenge.

It is likely that no one perfect trans question exists or that, at the very least, it will take years of research, cognitive interviewing, field testing, and adaptation to design. The socially constructed nature of the trans category coupled with its only recent emergence into the public mind mean that as a category it is likely to undergo numerous revisions in the ways in which it is socially, and personally, interpreted. In the meantime, however, framing understandings of the question, as well as its response patterns, within the context of a social constructionist and life course perspective, may help us make better sense of existing data and move us closer to the goal of that elusive ‘perfect’ question.

One of the advantages of cognitive interviewing is that it allows us to gain insight into the thought processes of respondents that can take us beyond a cursory understanding of the statistical data. In this case, probing on the gender identity and sexual identity questions proved particularly useful to gain a better understanding of why certain respondents answered the way they did and to a noteworthy extent enabled a richer understanding of the data. To this end, cognitive interviewing was useful in understanding how certain questions and response options were understood by different social categories of respondents.

Qualitative interviewing provides an additional means to get in-depth information from respondents. A life course analysis of trans identity read through a social constructionist framework was able to shed light on the when’s and the why’s of trans individuals’ survey response choices. It was able to provide a map that can be

overlain on previous findings in order to make more sense of the data as well as a blueprint for beginning to think about how to design a better way to measure trans identity on official surveys.

An understanding of how respondents interpret questions through the lens of their own life experience will allow social scientists wishing to improve question performance to re-design survey instruments in such a way as to reduce response error and increase question validity. Thus, findings from this dissertation could be used by survey designers to potentially improve the performance of certain questions, particularly as they relate to the trans community. The implications of “better” questions would be an increased capacity to accurately capture trans respondents on official surveys, which, in turn, has the potential to provide enriched data about the particular demographic features of this community.

The findings from this dissertation cannot help us produce the perfect survey question to capture the trans population. Given the shifting, flexible, complex nature of trans identity, that is a goal that I believe will be difficult to achieve. Until there is a nationally representative sample of, or including, the trans population, we will only have qualitative inferences. These findings can, however, help suggest new potential ways of assessing trans identity. What this dissertation also does is to move us several steps closer to understanding how to not only improve survey methodology related to the trans population and, therefore, to get “better” results, but also how to better interpret those results. An improved survey methodology, and more importantly, an improved means of making sense of that methodology, are important first steps

toward improving our understanding of the various issues facing the trans population today.

One of the most important considerations for developing a new trans-inclusive question is the type of survey on which the question will appear. A question targeted for a general population survey should theoretically be different than one targeted for a sexual minority or a trans-only population survey. The reasons for this, as discussed in the results chapters, is that interpretations of survey wording vary among respondents. Thus, for example, whether or not to include a primary response option of “transgender” might vary depending on the target population of the survey.

Trans-inclusive question design should also take account of structural factors such as legal identity at various levels (state vs. national), and whether or not respondents have identified in multiple ways over a given period of time. For example, a question might read: “In addition to your current gender identity, have you ever identified as any other gender?,” or, “Have you ever identified as a gender other than your current gender identity?,”. Follow-up questions to a more general gender identity question could also make use of a life course perspective to identify trans respondents. For example, a follow-up question might read: “Have you always identified as [gender identity selected on primary question] gender?,” or “Are you legally able to identify as [gender identity selected on primary question] gender in all contexts?,” or “Does the gender identity on your driver’s license match that on your federal tax returns and voting registration?”.

Findings from this dissertation can be used to improve future survey work related to sexual identity and trans identity, and, consequently, potentially have

positive policy implications for the sexual minority community, and particularly for the trans community. An improved means of assessing trans identity would allow for a better idea of exactly how many trans people exist in the population. These sorts of demographics are often used by the government and other agencies to determine funding and resource allotment. A more accurate assessment of trans identity would also allow us to begin to correct existing misinformation related to what we think we currently know about the trans population. Some of this information is quite damaging – for example, that trans people are more often poor, drug users, infected with HIV, and working as prostitutes. An improved means of capturing trans identity could thus be used to more accurately determine the particular forms of discrimination and health consequences faced by trans individuals and allow for more targeted and effective assistance and educational programs. Perhaps most importantly, what an improved means of assessing trans identity would provide is what many trans individuals want more than anything else – recognition of their existence.

#### Limitations of the Study and Future Research

This dissertation faces a number of limitations. First, the interviews for the first two results chapters were not specifically intended to test trans identity assessment. That is, although a testing of the trans response option was included, the main purpose of the interviews from which this analysis was conducted was to test a sexual identity question more broadly and not necessarily to test the question with a focus on trans identity. This meant that probing was limited on questions that might

have otherwise given more insight into the specifics of the trans option. For this reason, only inferences about such findings could be drawn from existing data.

This research also faced sample limitations linked to geography. Data for the first two results chapters were limited to interviews in the Washington, D.C. area and the in-depth qualitative interviews were restricted to a metropolitan area on the east coast and one in the West. Although every effort was made to get a diverse sample of respondents, and indeed many of the respondents in each of those locations were born and raised elsewhere, this limitation no doubt played a factor. The life course analysis in the previous chapter gave evidence for the importance of social space and place and so, drawing on that, it can be concluded that the sample would have no doubt been enriched by greater geographic diversity. Sampling respondents from various geographic locations would also allow for a comparative analysis of geographic influence.

Another limitation also relates to sampling. It is difficult to sample a population whose very boundaries you are, in part, trying to determine. In other words, since many people do not identify themselves as such, it is difficult to determine a strict population frame from which to sample. Although every effort was made to achieve a broad and diverse sample, an improved understanding of the boundaries of this population – ironically, a goal of this very dissertation – would have improved the methodological rigidity.

Another sampling limitation is related to who might have been left out of potential inclusion in the sample. Even though there were several respondents who no longer, or never did, identify specifically as trans, all did at least to the extent that

they would respond to a call for trans participants. There are, however, those who society at large might consider trans but who themselves do not wish to be identified as such who would have been left out. In other words, those who did not feel the criteria set forth in the call for participants applied to them, whether that be now, or ever, were left out of potential inclusion. It is likely that this population has some interesting nuances to their life course trajectories and certainly in the ways in which they identify on official surveys.

A potential limitation of the interviews is related to interviewer effect. It is possible that respondents might have given different answers, or been apt to use more “insider language” to describe their life course, to a researcher who was also trans. In at least some of the interviews, respondents used certain in-group language related to the gay community knowing that I am a member of that community. It is possible that their language choice or narrative style might have been different with a trans-identified interviewer. There are other potential demographic factors related to my status as interviewer – age, my own gender identity and presentation, physical appearances – that might have also shaped how respondents dictated their narratives to me, but I believe my non-identity as a trans individual was likely the most prominent.

This dissertation could serve as a model for future research on how to improve survey methodologies for capturing socially constructed categories. Drawing on cognitive interviewing techniques, a social constructionist life course perspective, and in-depth qualitative interviewing, future research could potentially help us understand the often problematic nature of capturing other socially constructed categories such as

race and ethnicity, or homelessness. By demonstrating the value of understanding survey response options in a dialectical relationship to an individual respondents' life course trajectory of identity awareness and development, this dissertation has contributed not only to the particularities of making sense of trans survey data and life course narratives, but also to broader methodological understandings of improving existing design and interpretation issues related to socially constructed categories of identity.

There is much future research to be done in the area of trans studies, especially in how it relates to the area of self-identification on official surveys. Future studies should test new forms of determining trans status as well as re-test old forms with the ever-improving methodologies being developed to ascertain both gender identity and sexual identity. As the socially constructed nature of trans identity is better understood, new studies will have to take account of the ever evolving ways in which this identity is constructed, interpreted, and reflected in self-identity. As trans people increasingly enter the social imaginary, the demand for this kind of research will no doubt continue to grow. I am proud to have contributed to this very important area of research and hope this dissertation will help enable a better understanding of how to determine trans identity on official surveys.



## Appendices

### Appendix A

#### Permission for Inclusion of Previously Published Co-authored Material

To Whom it May Concern:

J. Michael Ryan and I co-authored a report entitled "Design, Development, and Testing of the NHIS Sexual Identity Question". For this report, Mike did all of the interview analysis using q-notes qualitative software. He also was the primary author of the report from pages 8-21. I give him full permission to use the report as he sees fit for his dissertation.

Kristen Miller



Kristen Miller, Ph.D.

Director, Questionnaire Design Research Laboratory

National Center for Health Statistics

5/9/12

Date

## Appendix B

University Guidelines for Inclusion of One's Own Previously Published Materials in a Dissertation

Available at:

[http://www.gradschool.umd.edu/catalog/doctoral\\_degree\\_policies.htm#8](http://www.gradschool.umd.edu/catalog/doctoral_degree_policies.htm#8)

Relevant section copied from the web page:

### **Inclusion of One's Own Previously Published Materials in a Dissertation**

A graduate student may, upon the recommendation of the dissertation director, and with the endorsement of the home graduate program's Graduate Director, include his or her own published works as part of the final dissertation. Appropriate citations within the dissertation, including where the work was previously published, are required. All such materials must be produced in standard dissertation format.

It is recognized that a graduate student may co-author work with faculty members and colleagues that should be included in a dissertation. In such an event, a letter should be sent to the Dean of the Graduate School certifying that the student's examining committee has determined that the student made a substantial contribution to that work. This letter should also note that inclusion of the work has the approval of the dissertation advisor and the program chair or Graduate Director. The letter should be included with the dissertation at the time of submission. The format of such inclusions must conform to the standard dissertation format. A foreword to the dissertation, as approved by the Dissertation Committee, must state that the student made substantial contributions to the relevant aspects of the jointly authored work included in the dissertation.

Appendix C  
Interview Guide

How do you currently define your sex identity?

How do you currently define your gender identity?

How do you currently define your sexual identity?

How would you answer the following questions if asked on an official government survey:

1. Do you consider yourself to be...

- ☐ Male
- ☐ Female
- ☐ It is more complicated (Go to 1a)?

1a [If '*it is more complicated*' is selected] By answering it is more complicated, do you mean that you consider yourself to be...

- ☐ Male, assigned female at birth
- ☐ Female, assigned male at birth
- ☐ Masculine, assigned female at birth
- ☐ Feminine, assigned male at birth
- ☐ Transgender or genderqueer, assigned female at birth
- ☐ Transgender or genderqueer, assigned male at birth
- ☐ Something else

2. What is your current gender identity as of today?

- ☐ Male/Masculine
- ☐ Female/Feminine
- ☐ Transgender
- ☐ Something else (Go to 2a)

2a. [If '*something else*' is selected] What do you mean by something else?

3. Do you think of yourself as:

- ☐ [For men: ] Gay [For women:] Lesbian or gay
- ☐ [For men: ] Straight, that is, not gay [For women:] Straight, that is, not lesbian or gay
- ☐ Bisexual
- ☐ Something Else (*Go to 3A*)
- ☐ Don't Know (*Go to 3B*)

3a. [If '*something else*' is selected] By something else, do you mean that...

- ☐ You are not straight, but identify with another label such as queer, trisexual, omnisexual or pan-sexual
- ☐ You are transgender, transsexual or gender variant

- You have not figured out your sexuality or are in the process of figuring it out
- You do not think of yourself as having sexuality
- You do not use labels to identify yourself
- You made a mistake and did not mean to pick this answer
- You mean something else (*Go to 3C*)

3b. [If '*don't know*' is selected] You answered 'don't know'. That is because:

- You don't understand the words
- You understand the words, but you have not figured out your sexuality or are in the process of figuring it out
- You mean something else

3c. [If '*you mean something else*' is selected] What do you mean by something else?

Would you answer any of the above questions differently if asked on a survey that wasn't for the government? For example, if they were being asked on a survey for some LGBT organization? How do you answer the above questions on your medical records? (if there is a discrepancy) Why do you answer –insert answer– on –insert source– but would/do answer –insert other answer– on –insert other source– ?

How did you first learn that trans identity was even an option? When was the first time you met a(nother) trans person?

Tell me the story of when you first realized that you were (insert term – X - used by respondent)? Do you think there was anything unique about your own experience in this regard that might be different from those of other trans people?

How do you define the term “transgender”? “transsexual”? “-insert term - X- used by respondent-“?

How did you identify as a child? What was your childhood like?

How were your teenage years? How did you think of yourself during those years?

At what point(s) during your life have you changed how you self-identity in terms of your sex? gender? sexual identity?

Who was the first person you came out to? Why? What was that experience like? In what ways did this experience shape your future decisions about how to identify and to whom?

Tell me again how you think your identity had changed and developed throughout your life? Were there particular key people or key events that helped shape the course of your identity? For example, your parents, friends, partners, role models? Where there pivotal moments around which your identity shifted?

What do you think about the emergence of certain trans celebrities (RuPaul, Chaz Bono)? Has the attention they have brought to trans issues affected your thoughts about your own identity?

Do you live your life as X in all contexts? In other words, do you present as X at work, to family, to friends, walking down the sidewalk, on the metro, etc?

Have you ever hidden your identity for fear of something bad happening? If so, tell me a bit more about this experience (those experiences)?

What kinds of physical alterations, if any, have you made to your body? When did you make these alterations? Why did you make them?

Do you currently take any drugs and/or medications related to your identity (hormones, etc.)? If so, for how long have you been taking them? Why did you start taking them? How has your identity changed since taking this drug/medication?

How do you think others view your sex and/or gender identity? The views of your family? Friends? Co-workers? Strangers? Why do you think this is the case? How have these views changed across your life? Were there key events that you think caused these perceptions to change?

Are you currently in a relationship? Tell me a bit about your relationship history. How did your previous partners identify in terms of their sex, gender, and sexual identity? Do you only date a particular type of person- that is, those who identify as male, female, transgender, something else?

Can you tell me a bit about your sexual history? For example, what has been the sex of your sexual partners? Has this changed at all during your life? What has been their self-identified sexual identity?

How do you foresee your identity developing in the future? What events or people might alter or mark this development?

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