

**Examining the Experience of Trans Identity  
and Gender Transition through the Lens  
of Cisgender Siblings:  
A Phenomenological Investigation**

by  
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## Abstract

Previous research on the transitioning process has focused on the experiences of transgender/gender nonbinary individuals and their parents, paying limited attention to the trans persons' siblings. The purpose of this study was to examine how youth and young adults experience a trans sibling's gender identity and transition. Using qualitative methodology, eleven cisgender participants ( $M = 17.9$ ;  $SD = 4.9$ ; range = 14 to 34 years old) were individually interviewed in medium- and large-sized Canadian cities. Interview topics included: the participant's role in their sibling's transition; the impact of the transition on the participant and their family and peer relationships; and the participant's attitudes toward services aimed at supporting themselves through their sibling's transition. Interview transcripts were analyzed using interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA). Ten participants completed member checking procedures to verify the accuracy of the data. Participants described wide-ranging emotional responses and overall positive attitudes toward their sibling's trans identity and transition. Participants highlighted the importance of demonstrating to their trans sibling respect, compassion, and support. The adjustment process by the immediate family unit was regarded as manageable overall. Challenging interpersonal dynamics involving participants' parents, extended family members, peers, and other extra familial individuals were discussed. Perspectives on the value and preferred type of structured support for siblings of trans individuals varied across participants. These findings provide novel insight into the lived experiences of siblings of trans people, thereby enriching our understanding of the transition process as experienced by the collective family unit. Study findings offer practical guidance for trans individuals, their parents, siblings, and clinicians. Strategies to improve support programs for trans individuals and their family members are addressed.

**Keywords:** transgender; nonbinary; gender transition; siblings; family relationships; qualitative

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# Chapter 1. Introduction

The past few years have marked the rise of the trans rights movement, enabling the public visibility of transgender and gender nonbinary individuals. While long histories of gender-diverse identities have been documented cross-culturally, today more people of all ages are openly identifying as gender-nonconforming and transgender. With an increased awareness of gender diversity, we have seen law and policy makers, journalists, clinicians, researchers, community organizations, and the wider public all take interest in the continued social challenges faced by the trans community, particularly youth and young adults. The needs and rights of young trans individuals are gaining increasing recognition in schools, healthcare, labour movements, social networks, and families alike, notwithstanding continued stigma and discrimination.

From a family systems perspective, a family member's transition is not experienced in isolation, but is interwoven with the experiences of the entire family. Parents of gender-nonconforming, trans, and nonbinary individuals have raised their voices through organizations such as Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG) and through their participation in quantitative and qualitative research aimed at improving quality of life for trans individuals. However, the experiences and perspectives of *siblings* of trans folk have been vastly neglected. To date, no published research has focused specifically on the experience of individuals whose brother, sister, or sibling identifies as transgender or gender nonbinary. As a consequence, we do not understand well the means through which these individuals adjust to their brother's or sister's transition, their role in the transition process, and their role in the family's shared experience of adjustment. The current study is designed to help fill the void in our understanding of how siblings experience a gender transition and its implications on their family relationships and dynamics.

Prior to delving into the personal perspectives of siblings themselves, the literature review in this section is intended to describe the following phenomena: the sibling relationship; trans and gender-nonconforming identities in the context of the gender spectrum (including definitions of pertinent terminology); and finally, the ways in which sibling and other family relationships may influence, and be affected by, one's gender transition.

## 1.1. Roles and relationships between siblings

Although Canada has seen a decrease in the number of children per family unit, to date, individuals living in Canada are still more likely to have one or more sibling than be an “only child.” As of 2011, 55% of Canadian families with children had more than one child and 74.6% of children had siblings (Statistics Canada, 2011). Sibling relationships are generally determined by birth, foster care, adoption, parental re-marriage, and cohabitation. Such *ascribed* relationships differ from those that are *achieved*, or formed voluntarily and assigned merit, such as a friendship or personal occupation. Across global societies, the formation of a sibling relationship is generally pre-determined. However, in industrialized societies, the maintenance of the sibling relationship over the lifetime is often discretionary rather than obligatory. In the absence of caregiving roles and financial or economic interdependence, as observed in nonindustrial societies, the sibling relationship is socially determined (Cicirelli, 1994). As a result of these societal freedoms, sibling relationships in Western societies are largely socially determined. For many, sibling relationships represent an important component of an individual’s social network over the lifespan.

In the 1990s, scholarly interest in family systems perspectives gave way to research on the nature of the sibling relationship, although this body of research is still relatively scant. A comparative literature search by McHale, Updegraff, and Whiteman (2012) demonstrated far less literature on the sibling relationship in comparison to the bodies of literature on parental, marital, and peer relationships. This paucity of research is striking given the evidence that siblings remain an important source of emotional support from childhood through late adolescence (Lamb, 1982). Moreover, siblings can serve as social partners and role models for one another (McHale et al., 2012). Positive sibling relationships are also associated with positive psychological and social outcomes. For example, adolescents with lower levels of conflict in their sibling relationships report higher self-esteem and lower levels of anxiety (Campione-Barr, Bassett Greer, & Kruse, 2013). Similarly, positive sibling relationships in both childhood and adolescence serve as modest buffers against adverse outcomes for a sibling who has been bullied by peers (Bowes, Maughan, Caspi, Moffitt, & Arseneault, 2010; Sapouna & Wolke, 2013). As siblings progress into adolescence, their degree of companionship tends to decrease (Buhrmester & Furman, 1990). However, absolute

levels of disclosure and companionship between siblings remain relatively high when contrasted with other types of personal relationships (Stocker & Dunn, 1994). These findings indicate the importance of the sibling in a young person's social support network, even post-adolescence. Perhaps the presence and quality of one's relationship with their sibling/s is most crucial when one's other social bonds are threatened or diminished, as is sometimes experienced by trans individuals and others who have faced social stigma.

During the 1990s, researchers interested in the sibling relationship sought to determine whether demographic factors contribute to the quality of the sibling relationship. Studies found closer relationships between sisters than between either brother-sister or brother-brother dyads (Lee, Mancini, & Maxwell, 1990; White & Riedmann, 1992). With respect to birth order, in an American study of older adolescent sibling pairs, second-born and female siblings reported being more satisfied with sibling support, being more influenced by their siblings, and receiving more advice from their siblings than first-borns and males (Tucker, Barber, & Eccles, et al., 1997). While gender and birth order have been shown to moderate the closeness and quality of sibling relationships, I am not aware of any research which has investigated the impact of gender-variant identity within sibling relationship dyads.

## **1.2. Sibling relationships within the family unit**

To understand the sibling dyad, we must consider the larger family context within which the sibling relationship forms and develops. Family communication style is observed to be an important predictor of the quality of family relationships as well as the psychosocial wellbeing of family members. As defined by family communication patterns theory (Fitzpatrick & Ritchie, 1994), a family's style of communication is determined by two factors: *conversation orientation* and *conformity orientation*. Conversation orientation refers to the degree to which open communication about a wide variety of topics is promoted within the family climate. In contrast, conformity orientation describes to the extent to which a family expects homogenous attitudes, values, and beliefs within the family (Ritchie, 1991; Koerner & Fitzpatrick, 2002). A statistical meta-analysis of family communication patterns across 52 studies (Schrodt, Witt, & Messersmith, 2008) demonstrated that conversation orientation was stronger than conformity orientation in

predicting psychosocial outcomes, such as anxiety, depression, self-esteem, relationship satisfaction, and relationship closeness. Further, an observational study (Samek & Rueter, 2011) revealed that adolescent sibling relationships are closest in families with both high conversation orientation and conformity orientation (i.e., *consensual families*) and are least close in families who are low in each dimension.

Family communication patterns theory (Fitzpatrick & Ritchie, 1994) is associated with behaviours related to the management of conflict and stressors within the family. For example, Schrodts and Phillips (2016) found that family conversation orientation (i.e., degree of open communication) predicts sibling self-disclosure, as moderated by conformity orientation (i.e., degree of expected homogeneity of attitudes, values, and beliefs). Substantiating this finding, conflict avoidance among family members is higher among conformity-oriented families (Koerner & Schrodts, 2014; Schrodts & Phillips, 2016) in which parents attempt to unify their children's attitudes, beliefs, and values. Taken together, siblings from families with a high degree of open communication (i.e., conversation orientation) combined with the expectation of shared attitudes, values, and beliefs (i.e., conformity orientation) may desire to share their personal information and ideas with one another, "but not at the expense of relational harmony" (Schrodts & Phillips, 2016, p. 500). In other words, those siblings whose parents promote open communication but do not pressure their children to share their values and beliefs are most likely to engage in self-disclosure and address conflict. We may thus infer that, within sibling dyads, disclosure of transgender identity (often described as "coming out") and the subsequent maintenance of sibling closeness would be more likely to occur among siblings from conversation-oriented families who do not uphold conformity-oriented attitudes of transphobia or non-acceptance toward non-conforming or trans identities.

In sum, a family unit's communication styles and values (including their gender values) is crucial to our understanding of the family dynamics influencing the experience of a gender transition within the family. However, it is important to note that there are youth and adults who decide to live as their affirmed gender regardless of the degree to which their family expresses acceptance toward the trans person's affirmed gender identity.

### 1.3. Defining gender terminology and its use in the current report

Before summarizing the current research on family relations and roles as they pertain to the gender identity disclosure and transition of a family member, it is essential that readers understand key terminology regarding gender identity and the experience of being transgender or gender nonbinary, which is described below.

*Gender identity* refers to an individual's personal sense of their gender and is not necessarily visible to others. Because gender identity refers to how one feels and understands oneself, one's gender identity is determined solely by oneself and not by other people. In contrast to gender identity, *gender expression*, or *gender presentation*, refers to the ways in which we express our gender to others, as conveyed physically through clothing, hairstyle, body shape, as well as behaviour, including mannerisms, voice, and the ways in which we interact and socialize (Brill & Pepper, 2008, pp. 4-5). A person's gender expression or presentation may not match their gender identity which may not be visible to others.

In present society, one's gender is typically presumed according to their sex assigned at birth. Often people have a sense of their gender identity from a very early age, along with an understanding as to whether their gender identity in fact matches their sex assigned at birth (Brill & Pepper, 2008, p. 4). *Gender nonconformity* refers to the incongruence between one's *gender expression* and the stereotypic gender expression associated with their sex assigned at birth. However, as noted above, one's gender identity may not align with their gender expression or presentation. In consideration of this distinction, people who present as *gender-nonconforming* may identify as cisgender, *gender-questioning*, gender nonbinary (described below), and/or transgender. Furthermore, not all individuals who identify as transgender outwardly present or label their identities as such. Some people may identify as cisgender *and* gender non-conforming their entire lives; other gender cis gender-nonconforming individuals may one day identify (or *outwardly* identify), as gender nonbinary and/or transgender (both defined below).

To clarify what is meant by the term *transgender* (or simply, *trans*), this refers to a person whose *gender identity* is inconsistent with their sex assigned at birth. The

abbreviated term *trans* is recognized as an umbrella term that encompasses the “many gender identities of those who do not identify or exclusively identify with their sex assigned at birth” (Trans Student Educational Resources, 2017). Moreover, one does not need to transition from one gender to its so-called “opposite” (i.e., female-to-male or male-to-female) to identify as a trans person, as further described below. In contrast to a trans person, a *cisgender* (or *cis*) person is one whose gender identity is aligned with their sex assigned at birth.

The *gender binary* refers to the construct of femininity and masculinity as distinct and dichotomous (i.e., “male” versus “female”) classification, with the absence of any room for divergence from, or convergence between, these identifiers. In contrast to the gender binary system, modern gender theorists widely accept the construct of gender as a non-dichotomous *gender spectrum*. The notion that gender expands beyond the gender binary may also be expressed through the related concepts of *gender diversity* and *gender variance*, used to acknowledge the many ways in which one may understand their gender and express it to others.

In keeping with the gender spectrum, there is a growing range of terms through which an individual may identify their gender and articulate it to others. Whether one is cisgender or transgender, one may identify as male, female, both, or neither. Some cis or trans individuals identify as *gender nonbinary* (or simply, *nonbinary*), characterizing their gender identity as not exclusively male or female. Notwithstanding gender identity, the term “gender nonbinary” has recently been used to describe the gender aesthetic, presentation, or expression of either a cisgender or transgender person (e.g., Trans Student Educational Resources, 2017).

Further, a trans person may identify as male, female, trans woman, trans man, *trans-masculine*, *trans-feminine*, and/or some other identity. Both transgender and cisgender individuals may identify as: partially male or partially female (e.g., *demi-boy* or *demi-girl*, respectively); having elements of both male and female binary genders (e.g., *bigender* or *two-spirit*, an umbrella term referring to various Indigenous gender identities); being *neither* binary gender or without gender (e.g., *agender*); or, having any gender that falls outside of conventional gender norms (e.g., *genderqueer*). This short list of examples of gender identities is not inclusive. Further, one may identify with more

than one gender identity and may change how they identify over time; these individuals may identify as *gender-fluid*.

The acronyms *AMAB* and *AFAB* are used to denote that one was either “assigned male at birth” or “assigned female at birth,” respectively. These identifiers are used to further dissociate the concepts of sex assignment, which an individual does not choose, from gender identity, which only they can determine. Some *AFAB* trans males may refer to themselves as *FTM* (denoting a “female-to-male” transition), while some *AMAB* trans females may refer to themselves as *MTF* (denoting a “male-to-female” transition). While some trans individuals believe that they these older *FTM* or *MTF* identifiers capture well their gender identities, other members of the trans community have moved away from *FTM* or *MTF* identifiers due to their gender-binary nature and ambiguity with respect to the distinction between sex assignment and gender identity.

In the context of this study, I prefer the inclusive nature of the identifiers *AFAB* and *AMAB* over the terms *FTM* or *MTF*, from which *AMAB* or *AFAB* identifiers cannot be ascertained. I only use the terms *FTM* or *MTF* to reflect these terms used to identify participants in previous studies. I use the word “trans” as an umbrella term. To my best knowledge, this identifier is appropriate to all gender-nonconforming siblings of study participants, according to the participants’ reports. Moreover, all individuals who were identified by their cis sibling participants as “nonbinary” were also reported to identify as “trans” or “transgender.” While these terms are not mutually exclusive, not all transgender people identify as gender nonbinary and not all gender nonbinary people identify as transgender or trans. At times, I use the common acronym *TGN* to refer to both trans (used as an umbrella term to include gender nonbinary) as well as gender-nonconforming individuals. I use the singular form of “they/them/their” pronouns when: (a) these are the reported pronouns of a given individual; and (b) when one’s gender has not been defined or is deemed irrelevant to the context in which it has been used in this document. I used gender-neutral language because it is most inclusive, and because the singular form of “they/them/their” pronouns simply offers the most practical way of referring to a single participant in this study sample or any individual within a larger group (e.g., *If a cisgender sibling experiences this, then they...*). I use gendered sibling labels (“brother” or “sister”) or the gender-neutral singular identifier, “sibling,” to represent the relational identity that matches the preferences of the trans individual, as reported by their cisgender sibling. For example, when I discuss a “brother’s gender

transition” I am referring to an individual who was assigned female at birth. Likewise, when I discuss a “sister’s gender transition” I am referring to an individual who was assigned male at birth. The term “sibling” is used for one participant’s nonbinary sibling, as the participant indicated that their sibling prefers this gender-neutral identifier.

Beyond the gender spectrum, it is necessary to distinguish *gender* from *sexual orientation*. Sexual orientation refers to who you are attracted to romantically, emotionally, and/or sexually (if at all). The community of individuals who identify with gender and/or sexual minority identities is often synthesized into ever-expanding abbreviations, such as LGBTQQI2SAPP+ (i.e., lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, queer, questioning, intersex, two-spirit, asexual/aromantic, pansexual, polysexual, and others). For the purpose of further abbreviation in the current report, I use the terms LGBTQ+ and “queer” interchangeably, as shorthand references to the LGBTQQI2SAPP+ community. In past research community, the term LGBTQ has been used, in variations, to refer to the entire queer community when in fact, certain subgroups, such as trans persons, have been underrepresented or not included at all. When I refer to past studies in the current report, I try to delineate the specific sample population/s investigated in effort to prevent the continued mis- or over-representation of certain gender- and sexually-diverse subgroups.

## **1.4. Prevalence of transgender and gender-variant identities**

Current rates of gender-variant identification and gender minority identity disclosure are reported to be at an unprecedented level, despite historical difficulties attaining empirically-derived estimations. Recent population-based studies have helped to improve estimations of the prevalence of transgender identification among youth and young adults. Among adults, the prevalence of transgender individuals in a Massachusetts household sample was estimated to be 0.5% (Conron, Scott, Stowell, & Landers, 2012). Among American college students, only 0.17% identified as transgender in national sample of 289 024 students (Diemer, Grant, Munn-Chernoff, Patterson, & Duncan, 2015). In a survey of 2730 middle-school students (grades 6-8) in San Francisco, 1.3% of respondents identified as transgender (Shields, Cohen, Glassman, Whitaker, Franks, & Bertolini, 2013). Similar rates of transgender identity were revealed

through a survey of 8166 high school students in New Zealand, in which 1.2% identified themselves as transgender while 2.5% indicated that they were unsure of their gender identities (Clark et al., 2014). Finally, in a Dutch population sample of 8064 individuals aged 15-70 years old, 1.1% of individuals assigned male at birth and 0.8% of individuals assigned female at birth reported an “incongruent gender identity,” while 4.6% of people assigned male at birth and 3.2% of people assigned female at birth reported an “ambivalent gender identity” (Kuyper & Wijzen, 2014). As global rates of transgender identity appear to vary by sample, it will be important to conduct our own Canadian population-based studies to establish estimates of our own rates of gender variance, which are not currently known.

## **1.5. Possible components and trajectories of transitioning**

*Gender incongruence*, the mismatch between one’s gender identity and their assigned sex and gender, sometimes results in anxiety, depression, or discomfort (Tishelman, Kaufman, Edwards-Leeper, Mandel, Shumer, & Spack, 2015). As recognized in the latest edition of the *Diagnostic Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* or *DSM-5* (American Psychiatric Association, 2013), *gender dysphoria* is the psychiatric term for distress caused by the incongruence between one’s gender identity and gender expression and/or sex characteristics. Some but not all trans and gender nonbinary individuals relate to experiences of gender dysphoria.

*Gender affirmation* may be understood as the process through which one aligns their gender presentation with one’s internally experienced gender. The process of gender affirmation may include gender exploration, consolidation, and may ultimately include a *gender transition*, or simply, *transition*. A *gender transition* may include social and/or medical components. *Socially transitioning* refers to the process through which one modifies their gender expression, such as their vocal intonation, mannerisms, or outward physical appearance (i.e., clothing, hairstyle, etc.) so that the individual can live as their affirmed gender.

Gender identity typically begins to develop during childhood (Brill & Pepper, 2008). While coming out as transgender or nonbinary and initiating a gender transition may occur at any time in a person’s life, the average age of transgender identity disclosure is seldom reported. In a focus group study of 24 transgender youth

(Grossman & D'Augelli, 2006), the youth first became aware of their gender incongruence at a mean age of 10.4 years old, ranging from 6 to 15 years. They indicated that they first identified themselves as transgender at the mean age of 14.3, ranging from 7 to 18 years. The youth first disclosed their gender identities and first dressed as their affirmed genders at 14.5 years of age (8 to 18 years) and first sought hormone treatments around the same time (mean age of 14.1; range of 10 to 18).

Gender-nonconforming individuals may engage in the social transition process as a means of exploring and consolidating their gender identity and/or gender expression. During an individual's social transition, they may choose to be referred by a different name and/or pronoun (i.e., "he," "she," "they," "ze," etc.), which may change more than once over the course of their transition process as they continue to explore and consolidate their gender identity and/or gender expression. An individual also may choose to change their name legally and change their identification documentation to match their affirmed gender and/or chosen name. School-aged children may begin to partake in gym class or sports teams of their experienced and/or affirmed gender. They may begin to use the washroom of their experienced and/or affirmed gender or may choose to use gender-neutral washrooms, if available. For a variety of reasons, some trans youth may switch schools. For example, once a trans youth decides to live as their affirmed gender, they may not want others at school to know of their past life as their assigned gender and thus may decide to have a "fresh start" at a new school. Other youth may choose to change schools to circumvent bully victimization. Lastly, a youth may have attended a school which did not fully support them to live as their experienced and/or affirmed gender, such as (but not limited to) an all-girls' or all-boys' school.

Some trans individuals seek gender-affirming hormone therapy (a form of hormone replacement therapy, or HRT) or surgical interventions to further align their physical bodies with their gender identities, procedures known as *gender-affirming medical interventions*. These procedures are sought by some trans individuals to help them to feel more *gender-congruent*. Some of those who seek medical interventions do so to reduce gender dysphoria. The goal of gender-affirming hormone therapy is to promote the development of secondary sex characteristics corresponding to one's affirmed gender while suppressing the secondary sex characteristics of the sex assigned at birth. The most common masculinizing hormone treatment is testosterone, often referred to as "T" within the trans-masculine community. The general approach to

feminizing hormone therapy consists of a combination of an estrogen and an antiandrogen (or androgen-blocker), and sometimes a progestogen. When gender dysphoria is expressed by a child who is pre-pubescent or early-pubescent, families and trained clinicians may consider a reversible treatment to suppress or delay puberty through gonadotropin-releasing hormone (GnRH) analogue administration, commonly known as *puberty suppressants* or *puberty blockers*. Puberty suppressants represent the medical intervention which may be initiated earliest in the development of a trans or gender-nonconforming individual. Children and youth treated with puberty suppressants and subsequent gender-affirming hormones therapy show reduced gender dysphoria and psychological distress and improved subjective well-being (De Vries, McGuire, Steensma, Wagannaar, Doreleijers, & Cohen-Kettenis, 2014), demonstrating the mental health benefits of gender-affirming interventions.

Another type of medical option to further align one's gender presentation with their gender identity is surgery to modify or remove primary and/or secondary sex characteristics. Gender-affirming surgical interventions may include "top" surgeries, or chest reconstruction surgeries, such as double mastectomy, breast augmentation, or periareolar ("keyhole" or "drawstring") surgeries. AFAB trans individuals may also undergo hysterectomy and oophorectomy procedures, usually performed concurrently, to remove the uterus and ovaries, respectively. Lastly, genital reconstruction surgery, or "bottom" surgery options include vaginectomy, phalloplasty, or metoidioplasty. However, not all trans individuals seek or undergo all or any of these interventions for various reasons including the absence of any perceived necessity or desire to undergo such interventions, financial limitations, and other barriers to medical access. Of those trans individuals who deem a medical transition undesirable, some may be satisfied by a social transition alone or may experience gender dysphoria that is manageable without a medical transition; some may have ambiguous or conflicting attitudes toward the medical transition process and may be undecided; others yet may perceive medical procedures as concomitant with the gender-binary system which they may reject. Moreover, gender is a spectrum and trans people are a heterogeneous group, as reflected by the various transition trajectories one may, or may not, undergo.

## 1.6. Minority stress and social stigma

While some trans individuals have well-supported social networks that accept them fully as trans, the reality of anti-transgender prejudice, or *transphobia*, is unfortunately well-documented (Carroll, Güss, Hutchinson, & Gauler, 2012). In a sample of 571 MTF trans individuals, 78.1% reported experiences of gender-related psychological abuse, while 50.1% reported gender-related physical abuse (Nuttbrock et al., 2010). In a study exploring experiences relating to families of origin across 295 trans adults compared to their non-trans adult siblings (Factor and Rothblum, 2007), the trans individuals reported less familial support and more harassment, discrimination, and violence than their non-trans siblings. High rates of harassment are similarly seen among TGN youth. In a large-scale U.S. national survey, self-identified gender minority youth reported increased incidents of bullying and harassment compared to cisgender youth (Reisner, Greytak, Parsons, & Ybarra, 2015). Evidence also suggests that assigned sex may predict risks of social stigma faced by trans individuals. For example, Winter et al. (2009) revealed higher rates of transphobia toward MTF than FTM transgender individuals in a sample of 203 undergraduate students.

Irrespective of one's assigned sex at birth, one explanation for the negative attitudes toward gender-nonconforming individuals is the prevailing gender binary system that is so deeply ingrained in Western cultures (e.g., Carroll, et al., 2012, Gerhardstein & Anderson, 2010). The *minority stress model* suggests that minority populations endure a unique type of stress that reflects conflict between internal identity and societal, cultural, and political expectations (Marshal et al., 2008; Meyer, 2003). In keeping with this model. Meyer (2003) and Marshal et al. (2011) posit that prejudicial experiences (i.e., hostility, harassment, maltreatment, discrimination, and victimization) contribute to the higher rates of mental health issues, behavioural issues, and chronic stress among minority groups. Meyer (2003) also argues that subjective processes such as anticipated stigma may further contribute to stress related to one's minority identity.

Since the recognition of the minority stress model, greater attention has been devoted to understanding minority stress secondary to one's gender identity. Though under-investigated, proponents of the *gender minority stress model* propose that stressors secondary to stigma relating to transgender and gender-nonconforming identities result in adverse health outcomes and health disparities among transgender

individuals (White Hughto, Reisner, & Pachankis, 2015). White et al. (2015) suggest that social stigma may be internalized by a transgender individual, affecting the ways in which they perceive themselves and their environment. Internalized stigma may have adverse consequences such as expectations of rejection by others and attempts to avoid future stigmatization. Internalized stigma specific to one's trans identity is also known as *internalized transphobia*.

Some scholars (e.g., Carrol et al., 2012; Denny, 2004; Lev, 2005) have hypothesized that discrimination and stigma experienced by trans and nonbinary people may be partially attributable to the portrayal of transgender identification or gender nonconformity as a mental illness, perpetuated by the inclusion of Gender Identity Disorder in the previous edition of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* or *DSM-IV-TR* (4th ed., text rev.; American Psychiatric Association, 2000), originally used to classify distress caused by gender incongruence. In the latest edition of the DSM (DSM-5; American Psychiatric Association, 2013), the diagnostic classification of Gender Identity Disorder has been replaced by Gender Dysphoria to more accurately characterize the distress resulting from incongruence between one's gender assigned at birth and one's gender identity. However, the psychiatric diagnosis of "gender dysphoria" is not free of criticism from clinicians, researchers, and the trans community.

Contrasted with the diagnostic system of the DSM, the *International Statistical Classification of Diseases and Related Health Problems (ICD)* is the international standard classification system for disease and health conditions, including mental health conditions, as established and maintained by the World Health Organization (WHO, 2018). In the second to last version of the ICD (ICD-10<sup>th</sup> Revision, 5<sup>th</sup> edition; ICD-10; WHO, 2016), "gender identity disorders" were classified as "Mental and behavioural disorders." However, in the most recent revision of the ICD (ICD-11<sup>th</sup> Revision or ICD-11; WHO, 2018), "gender identity disorders" has been replaced by "gender incongruence," defined by "a marked and persistent incongruence between an individual's experienced gender and the assigned sex." Further, gender incongruence is classified in the ICD-11 under "conditions related to sexual health," instead of "mental and behavioural disorders," representing a major step toward the continued de-pathologization of gender variance.

In sum, our medical and social conceptualization of gender incongruence and

related distress is ever-evolving. Distress and mental health risks faced by trans populations, including young people, are discussed in section 1.7, below. Importantly, the mental health issues faced by some gender-diverse individuals are at least partially attributable to the persistence of prejudice, stigma, and discrimination against these individuals, consistent with the gender minority stress model. It is important that we first capture the prevalence of mental health risks among trans individuals in order to work toward the ultimate goal of enhancing protective factors to mitigate the social and emotional challenges experienced by trans people (subsequently discussed in sections 1.8 and 1.9).

## **1.7. Mental health risks among transgender youth and young adults**

Distress associated with gender incongruence may manifest in the form of psychosocial difficulties and mental illnesses beyond the DSM-5 classification of gender dysphoria. Over the past few years, studies with large data sets have investigated the mental health and wellbeing of transgender individuals, revealing high prevalence of anxiety, depression, suicidality, self-injury, and substance use among transgender youth and young adults. A review of studies examining the mental health of transgender youth between 2011 and 2016 revealed high rates of depressive symptoms and depression (12.4-64% prevalence across 10 studies), suicide attempts (9.3-30% prevalence across seven studies), self-harming behaviours (13.1-53% prevalence across seven studies), and eating disorders (2-15.8% prevalence across five studies) within this population (Connolly, Zervos, Barone, Johnson, & Joseph, 2016). With respect to mental health among trans adolescents, an Australian online study revealed high prevalence of anxiety disorders (44%), depression (40%), and suicidal thoughts (38%), among 14- to 25-year-old transgender youth (Smith et al., 2014). In the aforementioned U.S. national survey by Reisner and colleagues (2015), gender minority youth reported increased rates of substance use (alcohol, marijuana, and other illicit substances) in the past 12 months, compared to cisgender youth. Further, higher rates of depression and suicide attempts among transgender youth compared to cisgender youth has been observed in high school- and college-aged samples cross-culturally (e.g., Clark et al., 2014; Reisner, Veters, et al., 2015; Smith, Jones, Ward, et al., 2014). Overall, risks of anxiety, depression, suicidal ideation, suicide attempts, and non-suicidal self-injury have been

estimated to be two to three times higher among transgender youth and young adults compared to controls (Reisner, Veters, et al., 2015).

In Canada, population-based research on mental health transgender youth has only been carried out within the past few years, yielding findings comparable to those discussed above. A recent study (Aitken, VanderLaan, Wasserman, Stojanovski, & Zucker, 2016) found that children referred clinically for gender dysphoria since 1976 had markedly increased rates of suicidal behaviour, self-injury/suicide attempts, behavioural problems, and poor peer relations compared to siblings and nonclinical controls. The Canadian Trans Youth Health Survey, an online survey of transgender and queer youth in Canada, included 923 transgender youth ranging from 14 to 25 years of age (Veale, Watson, Peter, & Saewyc, 2017). The results of this survey revealed mental health disparities for Canadian transgender youth, including higher rates of psychological distress, depression, self-harm, and suicidality. Overall, transgender 14- to 18-year-olds were five times more likely than same-aged cisgender youth to report negative mental health outcomes, including those related to general mental health, stress, hopelessness, suicidality, and self-harm. Transgender 19- to 25-year-olds were four times more likely than their cisgender counterparts to report feeling sad for two weeks or longer within the past year, and more than 16 times more likely to have attempted suicide within the past year. Unfortunately, trans male youth reported the highest rates of self-harm, and nonbinary youth reported consistently worse mental health on average (Veale et al., 2017).

In sum, this body of literature highlights the adversities faced by TGN individuals, including youth, in Canada and other Western societies. This research substantiates the need to reduce stigma and improve social supports for trans individuals and their families. However, none of these studies investigated whether one's transgender identity disclosure or engagement in the transition process may attenuate their emotional and psychosocial distress.

## **1.8. The transition process and mental health**

In the past few years, researchers have begun to explore the social conditions underlying the mental health disparities observed among transgender and gender nonbinary youth and young adults. Within this area of study, researchers have paid

increased attention to the role of gender affirmation in the mental health and wellbeing of TGN individuals.

In contrast to the elevated rates of psychopathological symptoms in non-socially transitioned gender-nonconforming children and youth, positive mental health outcomes among transgender children and youth who *have* socially transitioned, have been reported by parents through quantitative research (Olson, Durwood, DeMeules, & McLaughlin, 2016) and qualitative research (Wong & Drake, 2017) alike. A U.S. community-based national sample revealed that socially transitioned transgender children (ages 3 to 12) had similar rates of depression to both a sibling group and control group while rates of anxiety were slightly elevated, based on parental reports (Olson et al., 2016).

*Self-reported* mental health by socially transitioned transgender children and youth was investigated for the first time within the past year. Transgender children and youth (ages 6 to 14 years) demonstrate normative rates of self-reported depression and self-worth, but higher rates of self-reported anxiety, relative to age- and gender-matched as well as sibling controls (Durwood, McLaughlin, & Olson, 2017). Overall, these results suggest a relationship, albeit non-causal, between the social transition process and short-term positive mental health outcomes among transgender children and youth, as evidenced by both parental reports and self-reports by trans children and youth themselves.

De Vries et al. (2014) conducted the first longitudinal study to examine psychiatric outcomes of gender-affirming puberty suppression, hormone treatment, and surgery among transwomen and transmen. The results revealed steady improvements in psychological functioning over time. At one-year post-surgery, rates of psychopathology among transwomen and transmen were similar to those of age-matched counterparts from the general population (de Vries et al., 2014).

Taken together, recent studies have demonstrated that engagement in the social transition process and undergoing gender-affirming medical interventions are each related to reduced social and emotional risk factors faced by young trans individuals. A greater understanding of the role of the family, and the specific role of the sibling(s), in supporting the wellbeing of TGN folk would contribute to a clearer understanding of the

mechanisms which may contribute to, or impede upon, positive outcomes for trans and transitioning youth.

## **1.9. The role of social and family support in the wellbeing of trans youth and young adults**

A growing body of literature suggests that, in addition to engagement in the transition process, the wellbeing of trans individuals is related to the degree to which they are supported by others. Maguen, Shipherd, Harris, and Welch (2007) found that transgender individuals who disclosed their transgender identity to more individuals (a mean of 3.5 others) reported greater social support than those who disclosed their identity to less people (a mean of 1.2 others). This finding suggests that the size of a trans person's social support network is indeed related to their perceived degree of social support. Moreover, social support and community involvement tend to moderate the relationship between stigma and psychological distress among transgender and nonbinary individuals (Bockting, Miner, Romaine, Hamilton, & Coleman, 2013). A trans person's family represents a key social network through which social support may be expressed.

From the broader LGBTQ+ literature, parental support has been shown to protect against negative mental health outcomes for sexual minority (i.e., lesbian, gay, and bisexual) youth (Eisenberg & Resnick, 2006). Research on the specific role of parents in supporting their TGN youth has converged with these findings. In a quantitative sample of 66 transgender youth presenting for medical care at Children's Hospital Los Angeles, youth-rated parental support was positively associated with life satisfaction and negatively associated with depressive symptoms and their perceived burden of being transgender (Simons, Schrager, Clark, Belzer, & Olson, 2013). Similarly, an Ontario-based sample of 84 trans youth and young adults revealed that life satisfaction and self-esteem were each significantly higher among trans youth who described their parents as "very supportive" than those groups of participants who described their parents as "somewhat" or "not at all" supportive (Travers, Bauer, Pyne, & Bradley, 2012). A relationship between the quality of family relationships and positive mental health outcomes among TGN youth has also been demonstrated. A recent quantitative study examining perceptions of support from the larger family system (including parents and

siblings) among 33 TGN youth found that higher ratings of family communication and family satisfaction were associated with lower depressive and anxious symptoms as well as higher ratings of self-esteem and resilience (Katz-Wise, Ehrensaft, Veters, Forcier, & Austin, 2018).

Investigations into the rates of transgender identity disclosure to peers, significant others, and family members help to further situate the role of the family, and siblings specifically, in a trans person's greater support network. In a sample of transgender adults (81% of whom identified as having male sex assignment at birth), rates of prior transgender identity disclosure to spouses and ex-spouses were highest (64%), followed by friends (53%), siblings (46%), mothers (39%), coworkers (35%), then fathers, children, and other relatives (29% each), in descending order (Maguen et al., 2007). Moreover, rates of transgender identity disclosures to siblings were higher than those to any other family member except for their current and prior spouses. It may thus be hypothesized that trans individuals may expect siblings to be more trustworthy and/or more accepting of their gender identities than their parents and other family members, highlighting the role of siblings in a trans person's gender identity disclosure and transition.

Qualitative findings from transgender support and focus groups have helped to illuminate how family support, and lack thereof, is experienced by trans individuals themselves. For example, trans members of a pilot psychotherapy group frequently shared fears regarding rejection and abandonment, the perceived need to suppress their emotions to maintain relationships, and experiences of "unsupportive or conflicted" responses from family members (Heck, Croot, & Robohm, 2015, p. 34). Pyne (2012) facilitated focus groups with a total of 18 transgender parents in Toronto. Similar to the findings by Heck et al. (2015), parents who had come out to their children as trans or were beginning a gender transition highlighted the importance of feeling accepted by their children and some felt that their children's use of their chosen names and gender pronouns were symbolic of their children's acceptance. While parents conveyed the difficulty of coming out to their children, Pyne (2012) reported that "some participants were surprised by their children's level of understanding" (p. 7). Pyne's group members also commonly reported difficulties in their relationships with their children accompanied by difficulties discussing relationship conflict with their children; however, such relationship difficulties tended to improve over time. Findings from these studies suggest

that perceived familial relationship difficulties associated with one's transition are not uncommon; however, with time, acceptance of a trans family member by cisgender relatives is achievable.

While this growing body of research provides evidence that family support is protective against psychological distress experienced by trans individuals, none of these studies have delineated the specific role of siblings in supporting the well-being of trans youth or adults, from either the perspective of the trans person or their sibling/s. A greater understanding of emotional reactions to a transition as experienced by family members would help to better understand the nature of intrafamilial conflict over the course of the transition process.

## **1.10. Emotional reactions to a family member's gender transition**

An individual's transgender identity disclosure and their transition process may prompt a variety of complex responses by those in close relationship with the person transitioning, such one's family of origin, romantic partner or spouse, and/or their children. The acronym *SOFFAs* has been used by scholars to refer collectively to significant others, friends, family members, and allies of transgender individuals. Research on *SOFFAs* has historically focused on female romantic partners of male-to-female transgender individuals (i.e., MTF "transsexuals" and "male cross-dressers") (e.g., Lev, 2004; Weinberg & Bullough, 1988).

Convergent findings have emerged from literature focused exclusively on understanding the experiences of parents in response to a child's gender transition. Based on an early detailed case discussion of a mother's adjustment to her MTF transition, Lesser (1999) discussed the mother's feelings of shock, horror, betrayal, disbelief, anger, anxiety, and depression in response to her son's transition. Similarly, through observations of a comprehensive program for gender-variant children and their families, Menvielle (2012) suggested that initial emotional responses by parents tend to relate to perceived threat regarding their child as transgender, and may include feelings of fear, disgust, sadness, and sorrow. Menvielle described reactions of pride, joy, and admiration which tend to be experienced during the later stages of acceptance and affirmation. Menvielle also noted that siblings may also have social difficulties relating to

their gender variant sibling; however, no further details about sibling participation in this program were described in his review of this program.

Overlapping with previous findings on the emotional reactions of parents, transgender advocate Aidan Key (2014) described five stages of acceptance commonly experienced by caregivers of trans individuals. The author describes the common first stage of denial and fear, at least partially resulting from historical societal judgement and stigmatization toward transgender people. This may often include the denial that gender identity itself is an issue. Another common emotional response is grief (e.g., the loss of a son or daughter) which often comes as a surprise to the individual. Key states that it can even feel like a death in the family for some parents and family members. Many parents also feel guilty that they had not been more supportive of their child earlier or that they had experienced other feelings that they considered to be negative toward their child. According to Key (2014), parents of gender-nonconforming children often reach a stage of acceptance and willingness, prompted by their awareness of the distress experienced by their child. Finally, once the parent has accepted the child as they are, they will often arrive at a stage which Key refers to as “celebration/gratitude” for the positive changes in their child’s life. During this stage, parents recognize the bravery and authenticity displayed by their child and may even “name their child as the hero in their lives” (p. 421).

In a recent study by Norwood (2012), analyses of online postings to transgender support discussion forums by self-identified partners, parents, and siblings of transgender family members revealed the theme of grieving the loss of their trans family members’ former identities. Family members sometimes discussed their grief as interfering with their ability to support their trans relatives/partners. Online posts by transgender individuals similarly described their parents’ dialectical struggle between grieving the loss of their child and coming to accept the person who their child has or will become.

While research focused on understanding a parent’s, partner’s, or broadly-defined “family’s” reactions to one’s gender identity disclosure or transition is scant, research focused on the specific reactions of a sibling is nearly non-existent. Corresponding with this research gap, practical recommendations for families of trans people are typically geared toward parents and tend to overlook the family roles and

personal experiences of cis children/siblings within the family system. One of the goals of the current study was to further contribute to the growing body of literature on cisgender family members' adjustments to a transition by including the voices of *siblings* of trans folk. The study also sought to gain an understanding of the extent to which reactions to one's transition by a sibling are comparable to or distinct from those experienced by a parent.

### **1.11. Cisnormativity as a family stressor**

In addition to emotional descriptions of the various reactions to a family member's transition, it is useful to consider how societal norms may influence how a family member's gender transition is received by the family unit. Some scholars (e.g., Gerhardstein & Anderson, 2010) have theorized that the distress experienced by transgender youth and their families over the course of a gender transition is largely attributable to the continued prevalence of traditional gender-binary attitudes. By extension of the gender binary, some scholars have suggested that the assumption that all individuals are cisgender (i.e., *cisnormativity*) has hindered families' understandings of one's trans identity and gender transition (e.g., McGuire, Kusalanka, Catalpa, & Toomey, 2016; Rahilly, 2015).

Parental pressures to conform to the gender binary have been found in qualitative studies exploring the experiences of families of trans and gender-nonconforming children. Giammettei (2015) suggests that binary notions of gender may hinder a family member's acceptance of a TGN child's gender presentation and their desire to seek gender-affirming treatment. For example, through in-depth interviews with parents of trans and gender-conforming children, Kane (2012) found that nearly all parents described the experience of social pressure which limited their efforts to resist the gender binary, a phenomenon which Kane coins the "gender trap" (p. 3). Likewise, nearly all parents of TGN children interviewed in Rahilly's (2015) qualitative study were described to have engaged in "gender hedging," or attempts to negotiate levels of gender conformity in their trans child's gender expression during the early stages of adjustment (e.g., willingness to allow a trans son to wear pink socks, but not a skirt, p. 347). While studies such as those by Kane (2012) and Rahilly (2015) suggest that gender norms may influence the ways in which a parent may respond to a child's

transition, these studies did not address the role of gender norms in a *siblings'* response to a transition.

In the current study, participants' gender beliefs and values were examined in effort to respond to the broader question: *How do individuals come to understand and respond to a sibling's gender transition?* The transmission of gender beliefs and values from parents and extra familial sources (i.e., peers, the classroom, media outlets, etc.) to siblings of trans individuals are discussed in Chapter 3, within the context of each participant's personal and family background.

## **1.12. Current perspectives on the experiences of siblings of transgender individuals**

As mentioned above, very few of the previous studies which set out to examine the “family’s” or “SOFFAs” experiences of a trans and gender-nonconforming family member include experiences of siblings. Most of this research is in fact focused on parents' experiences of a child's transition, from which experiences of non-parent family members have sometimes been extrapolated. To investigate the extant literature on the specific experience of having a sibling who is trans, I conducted a thorough literature search review of this topic, most recently updated in April 2018. To my best knowledge, only three published studies—each described below—have included descriptions of children's and youths' reactions to a sibling's trans identities and gender transitions.

A qualitative study of interviews with mothers of transgender girls (Kusalanka, Weiner, & Mahan, 2014) included children's reactions to their transgender siblings, albeit in the form of second-hand reports. Three of the five mothers interviewed explicitly described the reactions of their cisgender children to their transgender siblings transitioning (Kusalanka et al., 2014, p. 368-369). Cisgender siblings' reactions were reported to include a sense of loss, resistance (e.g., complaining that the transition is “inconvenient”), and the initial fear of others' reactions. According to one interviewee, their cisgender child eventually developed a sense of allyship toward their trans sibling.

Two studies include first-hand accounts from siblings of transgender individuals. Whitley (2013) interviewed a total of 50 SOFFAs; only five were siblings (three brothers and two sisters) of transgender individuals. One sibling reportedly expressed

apprehension toward discussing his sister's transition with friends, which was thought by the author to reflect the cisgender sibling's embarrassment, shame, and his own internalized stigma (pp. 609-610). In that study (Whitley, 2013), cis siblings' experiences were not otherwise described.

In the second of two studies which included first-hand accounts from cis siblings themselves, Barron and Capous-Desyllas (2017) interviewed TGN children and their family members on their experiences of a family member's gender transition. While this study was predominantly focused on the perspectives of four TGN children and their parents, the study did include a brief interview with one sibling (age eight), while another sibling (age six) was asked a few questions while observed at play with their sibling. Both young children reportedly expressed acceptance of their sisters as transgender (Barron & Capous-Desyllas, 2017). Both cis children were described as having been confronted by peers regarding each of their trans sisters. The father of one of these children stated that his cis son "feels that it is important for him to stand up for his sister" (p. 25). One mother described her cisgender son's negative confrontation by a classmate regarding his trans sister. This mother also commented that her cisgender son "rarely gets a moment alone with mom" (p. 23). No other significant content was provided with respect to the cis children's experiences of their sister's trans identity or transition.

Even parenting literature and clinical practice guides with advice on supporting a child's gender variance offer scant information on the experiences of cisgender siblings of TGN individuals and offer little suggestion, if any, on supporting these siblings. This body of literature is focused predominantly on managing challenges which may arise for cis family members in response to their sibling's transition. For example, Brill and Pepper (2008, pp. 54-57) suggest that, like parents, siblings too may experience a grieving process in response to the loss of a brother or sister. In addition to suggestions of possible experiences of loss and grief, transgender educator and activist Aidan Key (2014) cautions that distress experienced by a gender-nonconforming child can become a focal issue within a family, creating challenges for the family's cisgender child/ren. Key suggests that when children and youth recognize the higher needs and demands of their trans sibling or relative, they may minimize their own needs to avoid putting more demands on family resources or creating additional family stress or conflict. Key also suggests that some siblings may inadvertently disclose their sibling's gender status in an

“overcompensated” attempt to help or accommodate their sibling or to deliberately assert control over a central family issue. The author shared that siblings of gender-nonconforming children may experience greater teasing by peers, a decline in school performance, anxiety, depression, or behavioural issues. Key advises that cis siblings be provided education around the importance of privacy. Lastly, Key suggests the benefits of one-on-one opportunities between this child and their parents, as well as a therapist or group for siblings, if possible. These recommendations offer insight into the ways in which a young person’s transition may be understood and experienced by their sibling/s. However, recommendations for supporting families of trans folk based on first-hand accounts from cisgender siblings has, to my best knowledge, remained non-existent to date.

It is thus clear that, despite the current momentum accelerating research on families of transgender individuals, the experiences of siblings and their roles in the transition process have been vastly overlooked to date. Improved empirical information on siblings’ experiences would help to inform more specific and meaningful recommendations for such families. To my knowledge, the current study represents the first to directly investigate the perspectives and experiences of siblings of trans people.

### **1.13. Rationale for the current study in light of previous literature**

The current study was developed in response to the void in research focused on the experience of siblings of trans individuals. This study was carried out to improve our understanding of the ways in which individuals experience a sibling’s gender transition. I was interested in understanding: (a) how this transition impacts one’s relationships with their trans siblings and other family members; (b) how a sibling’s transition impacts the cis sibling’s understanding of their family roles; and (c) their perceptions of challenges and triumphs experienced within their family over the course of this critical event. This study was secondarily intended to improve our understanding of the extent to which youth and young adults may be interested in participating in a supportive group for siblings of trans individuals. I sought to gain an understanding of siblings’ goals and expectations for such a group, if in fact they expressed an interest in such a group.

While a sibling's own story is inherently meaningful, their story also functions as a lens through which we may further understand broader levels of the family and society. The sibling's view of the shared family experience may enhance our holistic understanding of the family dynamics across siblings, parents/caregivers, and the trans family member themselves in relation to their trans identity and gender transition. Moreover, close sibling relationships uniquely integrate components of kinship and friendship, and thus the way in which a cisgender sibling responds to one's transgender identity disclosure and transition is likely comparable to those responses of a trans person's cisgender peers. A sibling's impression of the phenomena of gender, transgender identity, and gender transition also serves as a microcosm of the impressions of these phenomena held by the greater society. By virtue of this microcosmic purview, changes in one's impressions of their trans sibling may offer insight into the mechanisms through which we all may progress toward the full acceptance and inclusion of trans individuals in society. On the flipside, one's difficulties understanding or accepting a loved one as trans serves as an aperture into the ways in which the broader society continues to grapple with explicit transphobia and discrimination, as well as more subtle forms of prejudice against trans, nonconforming, and nonbinary people in Canada and beyond.

## Chapter 2. Methods

### 2.1. Theoretical orientation

I approached this qualitative investigation through a hermeneutic phenomenological perspective, supported by dialogical theory. The methodological approach of *interpretative phenomenological analysis* was selected for its consistency with the philosophical underpinnings of this inquiry. Subtopics of interest were investigated through a trans-affirmative lens and were organized in keeping with Bronfenbrenner's *bioecological model* (1979, 2005, 2006), initially named the *ecological systems theory* (1979) and later (i.e., 2005, 2006) modified. I approached the data reflexively, with full recognition that previous and ongoing individual experiences would and did influence my method. My specific personal and professional life experiences and relevant worldviews are summarized in my reflexive statement below.

#### 2.1.1. Hermeneutic phenomenology

The philosophical movement of *phenomenology* was founded by Edmund Husserl (1859-1938), who advocated for the importance of recognizing our mental realities in ontological inquiry. Husserl emphasized that perceptual experiences are separate from the object being perceived. He proposed that the experiencer “bracket” the assumptions and beliefs that they impose on an object or experience (i.e., phenomenon), as the phenomenon has constituents that are separable, or transcendental, from the subject (i.e., the “experiencer”). Martin Heidegger (1889-1976) was a student of Husserl's and grew to criticize Husserl's transcendental phenomenology. Heidegger was less concerned with the biological phenomenon of “human nature” than with the existential “ways of life” that inherently take place in the context of the whole world (which Heidegger called “significance”). In this sense, a “way of life” is “shared by the members of some community” (Haugeland, 2005, p. 423), that Heidegger described as *Dasein*, the distinct experience or “mode” of “being” realized by humans, immersed in social, cultural and linguistic practices. This school of thought became known as *hermeneutic phenomenology*, emphasizing the contextual interpretation of an experience. Heidegger later highlighted that language does not simply correspond with reality, but changes humanity and our understanding of being

itself (Haugeland, 2005). In this light, our psychology is shaped and constrained by the institutional influences of society and culture as well as the constituent of language.

### **2.1.2. The dialogical self**

While hermeneutic phenomenology informed the foundation of my methodological framework, *dialogical theory* was incorporated into my interpretation of interview text, used primarily to address apparent contradictions in statements provided by a given interviewee. Raggatt (2006) likened one's life story to "a *conversation of narrators*, or perhaps a *war of historians* in your head" (p. 16), arguing that one's personal narrative often represents an integration of opposing viewpoints and experiences.

In the current study, some participants made seemingly contradictory statements, which offered evidence for seemingly conflictual themes represented by a single participant. . These seeming contradictions between statements made by a given participant may best be understood through a dialogical framework "involving a back-and-forth movement between [one person's] different voices" (Bhatia, 2002, p. 63). Hermans, Kempen, and van Loon (1992) refer to this phenomenon as a "multiplicity of / positions" (p. 30) experienced by the dialogical self.

In line with Bhatia (2002) and Hermans et al. (1992), I interpreted inconsistencies within an individual's narrative as naturally-occurring expressions of the multidimensional human experience. This interpretative perspective was largely developed through consultative discussions with committee member J. Sugarman (May 2017). The dialogical paradigm was first recognized by Russian literary critic, Mikhail Bakhtin (1895-1975) who was concerned with the multiple voices and their interplay (or dialogue), as influenced by language and genres of speech. In my view, this paradigm is coherent with the theoretical lens of hermeneutic phenomenology. Both are constructionist schools of thought which emphasize that our experiences and identities are *embodied* within situated social, environmental, and temporal contexts.

In keeping with the dialogical self as examined through interpretative phenomenological analysis, the *narrative* voice is the outcome of contextual influences on life experiences (e.g., Raggatt, 2006), as moderated by the interview process itself,

including the questions and language selected by the interviewer. Raggatt (2006) argues that no single life story can account for the multiplicity of narrative identity and that identity is composed of conflicting narratives influenced by moral positions (e.g., good/bad, optimism/pessimism, etc.). In the current study, incoherence between statements by a single participant were understood to reflect their dialogical identity.

When dialogical voices from a single participant became apparent to me during my initial interpretation of data within an interview, I used the qualitative procedure of *member checking*, described below, to raise the apparent “conflict” with participants and asked if they themselves recognized the conflicts which I had identified between their own statements. I invited them to share any additional feedback. I have elaborated on tension between themes and subthemes in Chapter 3.

### **2.1.3. Bronfenbrenner’s bioecological model**

In addition to the constructionist-interpretivist frameworks of hermeneutic phenomenology and dialogical theory, Urie Bronfenbrenner's (1971-2005) *bioecological model* (1979, 2005, 2006) served as a theoretical frame of reference that guided the structure of participant interviews and subsequent data interpretation. As mentioned previously, Bronfenbrenner (1917-2005) initially named this model the *ecological systems theory* (1979), which proposed that a child’s or youth’s development is shaped by the interactions within and between the multiple social systems in which the individual exists. Bronfenbrenner (1979) initially defined four environmental systems which influence an individual’s development: the *microsystem*, *mesosystem*, *exosystem*, and *macrosystem*. In 2006, he added to this model an outermost layer, the *chronosystem*, to represent the dimension of *time* and its influence on human development. The interactions between a child and their immediate surroundings take place in the microsystem, comprised of the child’s family, school and neighbourhood. According to this theory, the child’s development is most strongly influenced by the most immediate contexts in their environment, including her or his family, which exists within the microsystem. The mesosystem refers to the relations between two or more microsystems, such as the relationship between a parent and a teacher. The exosystem refers to the larger social systems in which the child or youth does not have a direct role but is influenced by indirectly. An exosystem may refer to systems such as community resources or a parents’ workplaces. The macrosystem represents the outmost layer of

the child's environment, which includes the cultural values, customs, and laws in the child's environment (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). The chronosystem represents the events and transitions that occur over the course of an individual's life over time, including sociohistorical events that impact the context in which an individual exists (Bronfenbrenner, 2006). When he originally developed this model, Bronfenbrenner (1979) discussed the concept of the *ecological transition*, which occurs whenever there is a change in one's position in the ecological environment. This transition typically involving a change in the individual's role and is critical to one's developmental process.

One's experience of a family member's gender transition is, by nature, an example of an "ecological transition" that occurs within and across settings (e.g., family home, school, etc.) and typically involves a change in a person's roles within these settings (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 2005, 2006). In line with hermeneutic phenomenology, Bronfenbrenner's model emphasizes the situated context of one's personally salient experiences. This model informed the current study by providing a system which classifies hierarchically the social subsystem/s relevant to a given interview topic or finding. In the current study, interview questions were aimed at understanding an individual's adjustment to change, namely a sibling's gender transition, through an exploration of the integrated subsystems in which related changes have occurred from the perspective of the cisgender sibling. Consistent with Bronfenbrenner's model, subsystems of interest included the participant's individual emotions and mental states, their dyadic relationships with their family members, their larger family dynamics, their interactions within their school system and peer system, and the cultural and societal contexts in which their gender beliefs have developed. Interpretations of the data were situated in accordance with this model.

#### **2.1.4. A trans-affirmative perspective**

My approach to data analysis was also informed by *trans-affirmative* values, reflective of my therapeutic orientation when providing clinical services to TGN youth and young adults, and their families. Austin and Craig (2015) describe trans-affirmative practices as those who do not pathologize gender-nonconforming individuals and, instead, validate all gender experiences. Trans-affirmative practice also recognizes the social, cultural, and political barriers to safety experienced by gender-nonconforming individuals and "actively works to intervene upon these barriers" (Austin & Craig, 2015,

p. 21). I am certain that this lens contributed to my conscious and unconscious choices of language, questions, and responses while conducting interviews with participants. For this reason, my trans-affirmative values likely contribute to my biases as an interviewer and researcher.

### **2.1.5. A reflexive position to the data**

Consistent with Ponterotto's (2005) understanding of the constructivist-interpretivist paradigm, the interactive interview process allowed for a deepening of selective content relevant to the current study and relevant to each participant's experiences. Similarly, the interactive member check process allowed for clarifications of any themes brought to surface through the prior interview. These dialogic processes lay at the heart of my interpretations and understanding of our co-constructed data. Likewise, the processes of data collection and analysis were unavoidably bound and limited by my personal worldview including my experience of gender, my academic and personal knowledge of trans issues and family relations, my ecological systems perspective, and my hermeneutic philosophical lens with regard to data interpretation and analysis. My specific worldview undeniably influenced my approach to participant interviews (including selection of questions and my perception of the importance or "saliency" of interview statements), data analysis (including theme identification, data synthesis, and descriptions of the study's findings), and interpretations of their relationship to other empirical knowledge.

From a reflexive standpoint, my perspective is shaped by the life experiences which I have had and those which I have not. In contrast to the positivist research approach that is aimed at establishing norms and universal generalizations (Davis, 2010), researchers such as Jasper (1994) attest that the goal of hermeneutic phenomenology is to describe the phenomenon from the "accounts of those who experienced it" (p. 312). In the current study, "experiencers" are both the researcher and the participants, whose perspectives are mutually contextualized by the participants' as well as the researcher's life positions, worldviews, and experiences. In keeping with this relational approach to phenomenology (discussed by Finlay, 2002), the researcher's perspectival and critical formulation of the data is not only inevitable, but also useful so long as it has been made transparent to the readers. Such transparency helps to elicit a comprehensive understanding of the whole phenomenon of having a sibling who is

transitioning gender (Sardello, 1971). Moreover, it is the responsibility of the researcher to reflect the data “faithfully” (Giorgi, 1971) and “capture” the phenomenon of interest through the research findings (Hycner, 1985). My purpose for including the following self-disclosing reflexivity statement (see section 2.2 below) disclosures is to allow the reader to situate the current study findings within my (i.e., the researcher’s) specific contextual lens.

## **2.2. Reflexivity statement**

I am a white, English-speaking Canadian cisgender woman of Ashkenazi Jewish heritage and thus have a limited understanding of other cultural identities and gender identities, especially those to which I have not been exposed. I use “she/her/hers” pronouns and believe that my gender identity is mostly consistent with my gender presentation and aesthetic. I believe that there is a wide spectrum of equally-valid gender identities and view the gender binary as a social barrier to gender equality. I do not subscribe to patriarchal pressures to conform to traditional hetero- and cis-normative female-stereotypic lifestyle choices, interests, and aesthetics.

I identify as an intersectional feminist, in keeping with my approach to qualitative research which is rooted in social constructionism, as described below. I recognize that complex and intersecting social factors—such as age, race, sexuality, (dis)ability, social class, education, and religion—contribute interactionally to inequality and discrimination (see Crenshaw, 1991). I also acknowledge that dominant groups have historically excluded non-white, non-cis, non-middle-class, and non-able-bodied individuals from these very conversations.

I have not had a family member disclose that they are gender-nonconforming or trans, and thus my personal understanding of being the recipient of this information is inherently limited. Bearing these experiential limitations, my witnessing of, and participation in, celebrations of gender and sexual diversity continually reinforce my respect and admiration for “queer culture.”

I have one brother who is two years younger than me, and with whom I grew up with our cisgender, heterosexual, married parents in a traditional, middle-class, nuclear family. Overall, we were raised in a very supportive environment and both have positive

relationships with our parents. My brother and I communicate intermittently regularly by phone, despite having lived in different cities for a decade. Overall, I view our relationship as strong and generally positive, despite moderate levels of conflict while growing up relating to sibling rivalry and differences of social values and interests. With the time and space from one another afforded by adulthood, we have naturally had more positive, supportive, and reciprocally-engaged communication, with less quarreling. Despite our divergent personalities, my brother and I continue to highly value time and cohesion within our family of origin. The experiences and values shared within my own family and sibling dyad have inevitably biased my perception of family norms.

With respect to my professional identity, I am a doctoral student of Clinical Psychology and have wide-ranging interests within this field. My training has included a specialized focus in neuropsychology. I have recently commenced a post-doctoral fellowship in clinical psychology, with a focus on neuropsychology. In my post-doctoral role, the intersections between my identities as a qualitative investigator and clinician have finally come to light. In my clinical work, I frequently interpret multiple aspects of a patient's problems, strengths, and identity, taking into account their emotional wellbeing, cognitive status, vocational and recreational activities, and life values, in order to inform meaningful diagnostic information and treatment to help the patient. In my post-doctoral research, I plan to conduct another phenomenological inquiry, similar to that designed in the current study. This study will likely inform appropriate methods of evaluation and treatment for individuals with *somatic symptom and related disorders* (see DSM-5; American Psychiatric Association, 2013), a complex and heterogenous patient group. In sum, I highly value research that helps to voice the experiences of underrepresented groups and believe that my current research endeavours will continue to better serve these individuals. Similarly, I hope that my clinical practice in psychology will continue to promote inclusive service provision, particularly that which may be accessed by historically underserved groups.

The path which led me toward the current research project was largely unplanned. I was introduced to the clinical practice of supporting trans youth through a part-time practicum conducted from April 2015 to December 2016 with Child and Youth Mental Health services (Surrey/Newton office) of the Ministry of Children and Family Development (MCFD) of British Columbia. As part of my training at this site, I provided therapy services to transgender and gender-nonconforming children and youth, as well

as assessments regarding gender dysphoria, hormone readiness, and surgery readiness, under the clinical supervision of Dr. Wallace Wong (Clinical Psychologist and dissertation committee member). Through these and other clinical training experiences, I gained insight into clients' experiences relating to diverse gender identities and expressions. I also gained an understanding of the types of clinical services available and the system through which a trans patient must engage in order to attain access to gender-affirming medical interventions.

### **2.3. Research design**

Research findings are represented through a multiple case study design. This in-depth qualitative approach supports the exploratory goals of the study, as the particular area of inquiry is largely unexplored. In accordance with the principles of phenomenology, interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) was used to examine the participants' psychological worlds at an in-depth level (Smith & Osborn, 2003) and provide insights into the ways in which they make sense of the phenomena of interest. As mentioned previously, this study was designed to investigate the following two phenomena: (1) how an individual experiences a sibling's gender transition and how this event impacts their sibling and family dynamics, and (2) their levels of interest, if any, in structured support services or programs for siblings of trans and gender-nonconforming individuals.

IPA requires a commitment to detail, which has been recognized by researchers as grounds for smaller sample sizes (i.e., "five or six" participants) (Smith & Osborn, 2003). Given the inherent heterogeneity of the trans population and thus the presumed heterogeneity of the experiences of the siblings of trans individuals, I aimed to recruit at least 10 participants. As discussed above (see section 2.2), the situated context within which I understand the world and the perspectives of the study's participants was informed by my personal and academic background, as well as my worldview. As a qualitative research study, this research design is considered emergent in its nature. That is, some of the procedures which were utilized and topics which were explored could not have been anticipated or identified prior to data collection. As I progressed through data collection, I incorporated additional interview questions and member check topics relating to the already-identified themes from previous participant interviews. Data

analysis also evolved over the course of this project in light of my own knowledge acquisition, interactions with participants and research supervisors, and reflexivity.

## **2.4. Research collaboration with Child and Youth Mental Health Services BC and study origins**

This study was conducted in collaboration with Child and Youth Mental Health (CYMH) Services of British Columbia's Ministry of Children and Family Development. Moreover, this project originated through my experiences as a CYMH clinical intern (i.e., clinical psychology practicum student), providing child and youth psychological services under the supervision of Dr. Wallace Wong, as mentioned above.

## **2.5. Study locations**

Interview and member check meetings were held in private rooms in Simon Fraser University Campuses (Surrey and Vancouver locations) and at public libraries and community centres in: metro and greater Vancouver (on the Indigenous territories of the Musqueam, Skwxú7mesh, Tsleil-Waututh, Kwikwetlem, Kwantlen, Katzie, and Semiahmoo First Nations); Victoria (on the Indigenous territory of the Lekwungen nation); and Toronto (on the Indigenous territories of the ᐱᐱᐱᐱᐱᐱ [Anishinabek], Haudenosaunee [Iroquois], Huron-Wendat, and Mississauga/Eastern Anishinaabe [Ojibwa] nations of the "Dish with One Spoon" wampum belt), in Canada.

## **2.6. Eligibility criteria**

Individuals were invited to participate in this study if they fulfilled the following criteria:

- i) The individual was at least 12 years old.
- ii) As indicated by self-report, the individual had a sibling or similarly close cohabiting family member (e.g., a cousin or foster-sibling) who self-identified as trans, including transgender, gender-queer, gender-variant, gender-nonconforming, two-spirit, or intersex *and/or* was undergoing; or, the

individual had a sibling who had previously completed any stage of social and/or medical gender transition.

- iii) The individual indicated that they had previously, or at the time of recruitment, resided at least part-time with at least one parent or guardian and their transgender sibling or close family member.
- iv) The individual was willing to attend the interview and member check session in or near the cities of Vancouver, Victoria, Toronto, or Montreal, Canada.

## **2.7. Recruitment**

I sought to recruit 10 to 12 participants through a “first-come-first-serve” approach, chosen for its inclusivity. Ultimately, recruitment efforts yielded 11 participants. Participant demographics are described in section 2.12 below.

The study was advertised through the distribution of paper and electronic recruitment posters and flyers. This poster encouraged individuals who were interested in participating to contact me by email or telephone. Paper posters and flyers were distributed through community clinics and organizations, including Child and Youth Mental Health (CYMH) offices. I also attended community groups for TGN individuals and their families in the City of Vancouver and other municipalities in the BC Lower Mainland. Lastly, I posted general study information and the electronic study poster on the Facebook pages and groups of various Vancouver-, Victoria-, Toronto-, and Montreal-based organizations for trans and gender-nonconforming individuals and their families.

When an individual expressed interest in study participation, or a parent expressed interest on their behalf, I sent them detailed information about the study and the consent form. When contacted by a parent about their child’s interest in study participation, I asked that the parent share the study information and consent form with their child. During my initial meeting with each unaccompanied participant, we completed the verbal and written consent process in detail prior to commencing research procedures.

As advertised, an honorarium in the form of a \$10 gift card was provided to each participant immediately following the completion of the interview and the member check session, for a total honorarium of \$20 value for individuals who took part in both study components.

## **2.8. Interview procedures**

Participant data was collected in the form of in-depth individual interviews with each participant (ranging between approximately 2 to 2.5 hours each). Ten of the participant interviews required only one session. One interview required a brief second session (completed during our member check meeting) in order to cover key topics that were not covered during the initial interview. Each interview was audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim.

All interviews followed the prepared *interview guide* (see Appendix B), outlining the topics and general questions to be covered in each interview. The interview was structured such that topics were introduced with minimally leading, open-ended questions, followed by more specific prompts. As per the attached interview guide, the following topics were discussed in each participant interview:

- (a) the individual's personal and demographic background;
- (b) their attitudes and beliefs regarding gender identity, gender roles, and gender expression in society;
- (c) their personal responses to their sibling's gender identity disclosure and/or transition;
- (d) their personal impressions of their changing roles in their families and relationships with their trans siblings and other family members;
- (e) the ways in which the individual copes with family distress or conflict and celebrate strengths and achievements over the course of their family members' transitions;

- (f) the ways in which the individual navigates difficult interactions with peers and adults outside of the family;
- (g) their interest levels regarding structured support for siblings of trans individuals, including the type of programs or services they would be interested in, what their hopes would be for these programs or services, and the time commitments they would be willing and interested in making in order to participate.

My use of a *general interview guide approach* (Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2003) enabled me to modify the interview protocol based on participants' responses (Turner, 2010). This approach was selected to involve the participant in the narrative direction of the interview without compromising coverage of germane topics of interest.

Consistent with my aforementioned reflexive approach, I recognize that the data from this study's in-depth qualitative interviews came to light through my interactions with participants, which helped to reveal our reciprocal and interwoven (i.e., "co-created") realities. In effect, my initial interview questions guided the content of each of the participants' responses, which directed the flow of follow-up questions, all embedded within the context of my and the participant's own knowledge and experiences. Furthermore, responses from those already-completed participant interviews inevitably influenced, both consciously and unconsciously, the directions in which subsequent interviews followed. As an interviewer, I sometimes used specialized concepts and terminology, grounded in my understanding of psychological and gender theories. Discussions of specialized nature were often reinforced by the responses from participants, who often demonstrated understanding and commented on these concepts and/or used the same terminology once presented to them.

## **2.9. Data transcription, analysis, and reduction**

Audio recordings of each interview were transcribed verbatim. All data transcribed from participant interviews were de-identified such that personal identifiers (including participants' names, ages, birthplaces, places of residency, schools, previous or present workplaces, etc.) were removed from interview transcripts and replaced with pseudonyms to protect the privacy of the participants and their families. Pseudonyms

were selected with the permission of participants. Changes to previously selected pseudonyms were made on request of participants.

The procedure of interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) allowed me to summarize systematically participants' collective narrative accounts of the investigated phenomena and identify the similarities and differences between cases. IPA provided a general method through which to "filter" the interview data through overlapping stages of data synthesis, theme identification, and thematic clustering. Each of the stages of IPA is influenced by the degree of importance of a participant statement or theme, which I refer to as "salience." For me, salience is informed by the frequency with which data points (i.e., interview statements) converge within and across participant interviews. Salience is further determined by the researcher's (i.e., my own) impression of the "potency" and novelty of such data. I use the term "potency" to refer to the degree to which the data appears to resonate with the participant/s and evoke meaning to the researcher. I use the term "novelty" to refer to the degree to which the data is new or unique to the researcher, or unexpected based on the extant body of literature on the topic. The frequency, potency, and novelty of the data to the researcher interact dynamically in forming the researcher's impression of data salience. As such, the factors affecting salience have no absolute hierarchical order of importance, but rather, interact dynamically across each stage of data analysis. The specific procedures of IPA are described below.

Once an interview was transcribed, I read the transcript several times, grouped relevant segments of the transcript into preliminary themes, and made additional comments, in order to summarize and paraphrase the data, identify relevant themes, and develop interpretations within each participant's interviews transcripts (Smith & Osborn, 2008). With regard to coding interview content, transcript segments deemed relevant to the interview questions or otherwise salient were selected and sorted into preliminary categories (e.g., "Personal responses to sibling's transition"), preliminary superordinate themes (e.g., "Emotional responses to sibling's transition"), and preliminary subthemes (e.g., "Happiness, pride, and/or admiration toward sibling"). All interview text deemed relevant to the current study was coded according to categorical and thematic groups, and continuously organized (i.e., re-labeled, merged, or omitted). I used a qualitative data analysis software program, *QDA Miner* (Provalis Research, 2004-2009), to assist in labelling text from interview transcripts, retrieving coded text

within and across participants, and calculating code frequencies. No automatic coding methods were applied. Using this software, codes could later be retrieved and sorted by participant, content category, or theme. At times, I added comments to coded segments of interview transcripts, which could also be retrieved in later data analysis. Comments included descriptions of key idiosyncratic information, notes regarding the salience of a statement (as indicated by the participant during the interview, or as judged upon my review of the interview data), and preliminary interpretations of the data such as links to relevant theories or previous empirical findings. Many of these comments highlighted content to be clarified with participants during the member check procedure.

As per the second step of IPA, I reviewed the long list of initial superordinate themes and subthemes within individual participant data and looked for connections among them (Smith & Osborn, 2008). I then merged closely-related if not redundant subthemes. At times, subthemes appeared to represent more than one specific thematic cluster, which were further subdivided and re-labeled accordingly.

All verbatim statements and interpretations of the data which I deemed relevant to the research questions and/or otherwise salient were selected for data interpretation as provided codes. These codes were intended to capture both new and recurrent themes, organized conceptually. Themes that clustered together were categorized as subordinate themes or “subthemes” of an overarching or superordinate theme. Over the course of these coding procedures, some theme labels were modified as they became increasingly specific or general. Once superordinate theme and subtheme labels were modified and re-organized as appropriate, they were cross-checked with the primary source material (i.e., the transcripts) to ensure that they remained relevant to original participant statements which they were intended to capture (as per the methodology described by Smith & Osborn, 2008). Thematic clusters were open to revisions and refinement during participant member checks; however, all participants indicated that the thematic labels applied to their interview statements had accurately captured their experiences, as well as their specific interview statements.

In the third step of IPA, analyses of data from individual participants were re-read in consideration of their similarities and differences, which were further integrated into the study's findings. As expected prior to the commencement of data analysis, my own theoretical perspective and awareness of previously identified and clustered themes

in the current analysis both influenced (or “situated”) my conceptualization and formulation of the data at hand. The inevitability of this research bias represents what hermeneutic philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer (1900-2002; 2000) referred to as humans’ “historically effected consciousness” (*wirkungsgeschichtliches Bewußtsein*). The dynamic process of comparing similarities between and among thematic clusters from individual data sets allowed me to identify overlapping content, as well as new boundaries across which the data distinguishes itself, across transcripts of participant interviews.

As Smith and Osborn (2008) cautioned, at times, themes converge in quite different ways across participants, which can necessitate higher-level themes distinguished by idiosyncrasies of individual cases. The reader is thus encouraged to refer to Chapter 3 for brief individual narratives shared by each participant, which help to contextualize why a participant’s statements may or may not have supported a given theme.

Instead of working towards data “saturation,” Brocki and Wearden (2006) argue that the researcher should “acknowledge limits to the representational nature of their data” (p. 94). Given the multifarious and complex issues under investigation, along with the variable particularities of participants, saturation of the data would be unlikely. Moreover, the current study’s findings reflected rich contingencies and particularities within individual cases, rendering generalization cautionary. Furthermore, the study’s main findings, as well as select findings specific to subsets of the sample, are thought to be applicable to other individuals and groups who share the characteristics relevant to the particular findings. Notably, the current study is based on a small and heterogenous sample. Therefore, one must carefully compare the characteristics of the current sample (or sample subset) and the context of the findings to the characteristics and context of the case (i.e., person) or population of interest, in order to determine whether the current study findings are relevant, and thus transferable, to that person or population.

Data analysis continued through the member check procedure (see section 2.10.1) and into the writing stage, during which thematic clusters were further refined. Following this member check, themes were once again expanded in the form of explanations, examples, and analytic commentary (Smith, 1996; Smith & Osborn, 2003). Over the course of my analyses, I aimed to analyze the data and described my findings

in ways that were well-supported by interviewees' statements. This correspondence between research data, interpretation, and meaning represents a feature of qualitative research fidelity known as *groundedness* (see Levitt, Motulsky, Wertz, Morrow, & Ponterotto, 2017, p. 14). Member checking helped in ensuring that my interpretations of interview statements did not stray from the meanings intended by participants.

In sum, data was analyzed using *Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA; Smith et al., 1999; Smith & Osborn, 2003)*, a well-established qualitative method aimed at understanding how an individual makes sense of a specific experience or phenomenon. In accordance with this approach to data analysis, data deemed relevant to my topic and subtopics of inquiry, or otherwise felt to be salient, were summarized and paraphrased. Themes were then identified, similarities and differences between participants' individual data were examined, and finally, the data was synthesized into superordinate and subordinate themes (i.e., themes and subthemes, respectively) across participants.

### **2.9.1. Verification of the data through participant member checks**

As mentioned above, each participant was invited to take part in the member check procedure, an individual meeting between the participant and me (the researcher), conducted once I had analyzed the participant's interview data. Member check sessions took approximately two hours to complete and sometimes longer, as described below. Those individuals who participated (10 of 11 participants) were each provided a summary of their individual interview data and were asked to review and verify the accuracy of these summaries. These summaries included themes which I had identified through my analysis of their interview data. The purpose of this procedure was to ensure that the themes, interview statements, and narratives derived from individual's data set accurately reflected the participant's intended words and meanings.

Each participant who took part in the member check reviewed their own relevant background narrative, including: their individual and family history, their background gender beliefs, and their descriptions of their sibling's transition (see *Chapter 3*). Each member check also included a review of the topics and themes which I had identified from the participant's interview, as well as all key interview statements short-listed for inclusion in the current publication in order to illustrate the identified themes. When

unclear about the meaning of a participant's statement, I used the member check to ask a participant to clarify whether their perspective conformed to a hypothesized theme or not. To mitigate "false positive" endorsements of themes by participants, I did not follow up on themes which I judged to be irrelevant or non-salient to that participant's interview. Thus, I could not determine whether participants who did not provide evidence for a given theme *would* have either supported this theme or expressed explicit disagreement, representing an inherent limitation to the chosen methodology.

Three participants required additional time for their member checks procedures, beyond the allotted two hours. One of these participants completed an interview addendum just prior to the member check and was thus asked to review and verify the additional information incorporated from this interview addendum. Each of these three participants was provided a copy of their member check document to review on their own and were given the choice of submitting any relevant notes or revisions by mail, email (via encrypted, password-protected, and de-identified documents) or by telephone. Two of these participants partook in a follow-up discussion by telephone and one provided feedback by email, each within seven weeks of their initial member check sessions. Two additional participants who completed member checks were provided copies of the member check documents for their own personal interest, as per their requests.

Member checking is frequently used in qualitative methodologies to enhance the credibility of the data. This opportunity for the participant to evaluate the researcher's observations and conclusions is guided by both methodological theory and ethical obligation, consistent with Flinders' (1992) notion of relational ethics. The methodological purpose of this procedure is to ensure that the themes derived from individual's data set accurately reflect the statements made by the participants and the participant's intended meanings of these statements. As emphasized by Todres and Galvin (2006), validity in IPA-based research is not about agreement between interpretations, but rather about "whether the embodied interpretation carries forward the general structure in plausible and insightful ways" (p. 52). Moreover, the hermeneutic phenomenological perspective does not view the phenomena under investigation as empirical observations that can be objectively verified, nor verified through some form of inter-observer reliability; instead, these phenomena are understood as interpretations of experiences that are made subject to interpretive analysis. In addition to the methodological objective of increasing

credibility of the data, I believe that the researcher has an ethical responsibility to act with care and respect for each of the participants as persons. The member check procedure helps to “confirm” (Flinders, 1992) or support research participants by providing them an opportunity to review, reflect on, and contribute to the way in which they are represented in the report of the research findings. This process is intended to support the integrity of each participant as experts of their own experiences and active contributors to the data.

### **2.9.2. A note on the appended pilot manual for siblings of trans individuals**

While developing the protocols for the current study, I designed a “sibling group” manual (see Appendix A) intended to offer emotional support, social support, and education to adolescent siblings of TGN folk. These goals reflect Zamboni’s (2006) recommendation that therapy with families of transgender individuals ought to include emotional validation, social support, as well as education about what it means to identify as transgender. Because no previous protocols for siblings of trans folk existed, the sibling group manual which I developed was intended as an exploratory pilot program, to be modified based on participants’ qualitative and quantitative pre- and post-group feedback.

Unfortunately, recruitment efforts were unsuccessful in yielding research group participants given the study’s limited time frame, age restrictions (12-18 years), and location. The lack of success in my recruitment efforts led me to question my assumptions about the experience of having a trans sibling and the extent to which these siblings may want or need additional structured support, such as that which would have been offered through the initially-designed sibling group. I also asked myself (and eventually the current study participants) what topics siblings themselves felt should be covered (if any) in any such sibling group. Rather than limiting study participants to adolescents, I decided to interview any sibling 12 years or older. I believe that anyone—adolescent to older adult— who has a sibling who is trans or gender-nonbinary may speak to this experience, whether the transition is in its early stages or occurred years prior to the interview.

## **Chapter 3. Descriptive Summaries of Participants**

### **3.1. Summary of grouped demographics across participants**

#### **3.1.1. Age, education, and geographic locations**

This study consists of 11 participants, ranging from 14 to 34 years of age. The mean age was 17.9 years ( $SD = 4.9$ ). Nine participants were teenagers in high school, two were high school graduates in university in their early twenties, and one participant was an employed professional in her early thirties. Nine participants indicated that they were born and raised in Canada, while two participants reported that they were born in the United States, where they spent much of their childhood, before relocating to Canada. At the time of the interview, three participants were reportedly living in Metro Vancouver, three were living in the Fraser Valley region (B.C. Lower Mainland), one was living in Metro Victoria, and three were living in mid-sized to large cities in Southwestern Ontario.

#### **3.1.2. Cultural, ethnic, and religious identities**

When participants were asked about their cultural and ethnic backgrounds, only three participants indicated cultural/ethnic minority identification: “Jewish,” “Ashkenazi Jewish,” and a mix of American and Eastern European identities (not further specified to respect participant privacy). Regarding religious identities, 10 participants described themselves as predominantly secular, while one participant stated that their religion was “Jewish” but described somewhat limited engagement in religious practices.

While participants were asked about the impact of culture and socioeconomic status on their perceptions of gender and experiences of their sibling’s TGN identity, participants were not asked explicitly about racial or ethnic minority identity. No participants discussed any impact of racial minority identity on the phenomena of interest. Only two participants discussed their cultural backgrounds as relevant to aspects of their experiences pertaining to their sibling’s trans identity and/or gender transition. Neither was deemed particularly salient to the research findings; further,

interpretations of these aspects of the participants' experiences were not described due to risk of participant identification.

### **3.1.3. Participants' gender and sexual identities**

All participants identified as cisgender, nine as female and two as male. Although not all participants voluntarily disclosed their sexual orientations, one participant identified as a "lesbian" and as "queer," one identified as "asexual," and another identified as "not 100% straight." Each of these individuals who self-identified as with a minority sexual orientation at the time of the interview indicated some association between their own sexual identity and their experience of their siblings as trans.

### **3.1.4. Family structures and living situations**

Nine participants reported that their parents were always married, while three participants indicated that their parents were divorced, separated, or previously separated. Ten participants indicated that they were living with their parents and families of origin at the time of the interview, one of whom was living abroad during the previous two university terms. One participant was raised with her family of origin and living with her significant other at the time of the interview.

Although participants were not directly queried about whether they were biologically related to their siblings, none of the participants described experiences of known adoption or foster care arrangement. One participant indicated that she and her trans brother were half-siblings.

All participants indicated that they were raised with their transgender siblings for extended periods throughout their development. At the time of the interview, seven had resided full-time with their trans sibling since birth until the time of the interview. The remaining four participants indicated that they had spent the majority of their lives living full-time with their transgender siblings; one of these participants had moved out of the family home as an adult and another was living away from home while attending university.

### **3.1.5. Birth order and gender within sibling dyads and triads**

With respect to birth order, three participants were first-born siblings (including one “twin A”), two were middle-born, and six were last-born siblings.

Regarding participants’ number of siblings, six participants indicated that they had just one sibling, who identified as trans. Of these participants with only one sibling, one was a first-born sibling and five were last-born siblings. Five participants indicated that they had two siblings each. Of these participants, two were first-born siblings (including one twin), two were middle-born siblings, and one was a last-born sibling.

Across all 11 cis participant-trans sibling dyads represented in this study, five participants were the older sibling of the pair (including a pair of twins) and six participants were the younger sibling to their trans sibling.

Eight of the 11 participants had trans siblings (“brothers”) who were AFAB, eight of whom were reported to identify as male and one of whom was reported to identify as trans-masculine gender nonbinary. The remaining three participants had trans siblings who were AMAB (two “sisters” and one “sibling”), two of whom were reported to identify as female, and one of whom was reported to identify as femme/nonbinary.

Of all participant dyads with their trans siblings, seven were mixed-gender pairs and four were same-gender pairs (i.e., as per the siblings’ affirmed genders). Of the nine cis female participants, six stated they had a trans (AFAB) brother (including one nonbinary individual), two stated they had a trans (AMAB) sister, and one stated that they had a nonbinary (AMAB) sibling (i.e., neither “brother” nor “sister”). Both of the two male participants stated that they had a trans (AFAB) brother. Unfortunately, no pairs of cis brothers and trans sisters were represented in this study.

## **3.2. Individual summary of participants’ personal and family backgrounds, their trans sibling, and their sibling’s transition**

The purpose of this section is to summarize the following aspects of each participant’s history: their individual identity; their family structure and relationships between family members; their trans sibling and their sibling relationship with their trans

sibling; and, their family's general response to their trans sibling's trans identity and transition. Each narrative includes paraphrased summaries and direct excerpts from participant interviews and member check sessions. All participants who completed the member check session (10 of 11 participants) reviewed an expanded draft of their personal narrative, including the selected interview excerpts. I caution that these are cis stories of siblings of trans folk and are not intended to overwrite the personal accounts of the trans individuals (i.e., the "trans stories"). These cis sibling stories may supplement trans narratives in characterizing the family experience but may represent distinct accounts of the trans sibling and their transition from the trans sibling themselves. The lack of inclusion of trans stories in this dissertation is an important limitation of the current investigation, as further discussed in section 5.1, below.

### **3.2.1. Leanne**

Leanne is a 15- to 17-year-old cis female high school student living in the Greater Vancouver Area of the BC Fraser Valley. She described herself as very social, loving, and funny. She shared that she highly values time with friends and family and is interested in fitness and movies. She characterized her gender presentation as "more feminine." Leanne shared that, after being introduced to trans issues through her own experience of having a trans sibling, she learned about gender diversity through two academic courses. Leanne stated that she was not personally engaged in the LGBTQ+ community.

#### ***Family structure and relations***

Leanne's immediate family additionally includes her mother, father, and twin siblings, include her trans brother, Joe, and his fraternal, cisgender twin sister, Ellie. The twins are seven to 10 years old (seven to 10 years younger than Leanne). Leanne has lived with her twin siblings since they were born.

Leanne described her immediate family as quite close and cohesive. She shared that her immediate family frequently engages in activities as a group. Leanne described the atmosphere of her home as generally quite busy and "hectic," with a few breaks when she is babysitting the twins while her parents are out of the family home. Leanne described parents as very open and LGBTQ-friendly. She felt that her and her siblings were not pressured to conform with traditional gender presentations.

Leanne shared that she and her family do not identify with any distinct cultural background or any religious beliefs. Socioeconomically, she described herself as “middle class.” However, she did share that she sometimes worries that her family “won’t be able to afford some things, but [is] sure [her] parents will find ways for Joe.”

Leanne described equally close and loving relationships, despite frequent arguments with both Joe and Ellie. Leanne felt close to both her siblings despite being ages apart. She described her role in providing her younger siblings peer mentorship, demonstrated by helping them with their school work and with their peer relations.

Leanne described having a large extended family, particularly on her paternal side, including grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins. All extended family members were reported to have been informed about Joe’s gender transition.

### ***Brief profile of Leanne’s trans brother and their dyadic sibling relationship***

Joe is an 8-to-10-year-old trans boy (AFAB; pronouns “he/him/his”). Leanne stated that she spends time with both Joe and Ellie (i.e., both her twin siblings) watching television, playing videogames or with Lego, playing outside, and playing with their family dog.

### ***Brief account of sibling’s transition***

Leanne described Joe as experiencing gender incongruence as a toddler, wearing male-stereotypic clothing around age two and having his hair cut short around age three:

... [H]e started to pick out his own clothes, and maybe play with different, certain toys. And when my mum would have her friends over that have kids, he would go more towards the boys that were babies, rather than the girls... And when he got older he started to speak more. You could tell, the things he was saying, the things he wanted to wear, and the things he wanted to do were more “boy” characteristics...

Leanne shared that when Joe was around three or four years old, their mother began to ask him if he wanted to change his name from his birth name, which he subsequently changed. However, during this period, Leanne’s mother refrained from explicitly describing Joe’s experience as a gender transition to Leanne, because it was not clear that Joe would subsequently want to identify as male in the future.

Leanne stated that she believes Joe was teased “a little bit” in school prior to his social transition.

Well when he first started going to school I remember he would cry almost every night because he felt he didn't belong because at the time he was still using the woman's washroom. I think he then got picked on or called out by some classmates that he was a boy using the girls' washroom.

Leanne stated that when she was a child, her mother opened a discussion with her about Joe being transgender, which included teaching what it meant to be trans and the decision to have Joe begin to present publicly as male. Leanne admitted that she did not understand what this meant until she was about twelve years old. Her mother explained to Leanne what it means to be transgender as follows:

It was like, he was born a girl, but he wanted it to be a boy. In his head he was a boy. On the outside he was a girl. So he just wanted to make the outside feel like the inside... He's always been Joe on the inside, I feel like. He never was Joelle on the inside...

At around age five, just before starting kindergarten and about two years after his name change, Joe changed pronouns from “she/her/hers” to “he/him/his.” Around this period, Leanne began to recognize Joe as her “brother” rather than her “sister.”

By the time of the current interview, Joe was described to present completely as male “[b]ecause he looks like a boy, 100 percent.”

Leanne's family began to discuss the medical aspect of Joe's transition within the year prior to her participant interview. Leanne stated that she had not been involved in conversations regarding the details of such decisions.

### ***General family responses to Joe's trans identity and transition***

Leanne described herself and her parents as very supportive and accepting of Joe's transition and trans identity. She stated that her mother was very involved in Joe's transition and encouraged him to freely explore his gender expression.

... [W]e're very supportive, we're very caring, we're very sensitive when I feel like we need to be around certain subjects [regarding the transition]. So, I feel like those are all strengths that we have.

He's always been a boy, and so I feel like it would have been weird if he went, girl-girl-girl-girl up to a certain age, and was like, “Yeah, I've been hiding this secret from you guys for this long.” I feel like it's almost

better, in a way, that he just felt like he could have come out in that way... I feel like that says that we're supportive. Like, he wasn't nervous that we weren't gonna support him, I don't think. But at the same time, he was so young, I don't think he could have known.

Leanne stated that her parents often watch documentaries on issues pertaining to trans individuals, including those specific to trans children. However, she described her father as less sensitive with his choice of gender-related language, which Leanne related to the fact that her father grew up in a Christian household with more traditional gender values.

By the time of the current interview, all members of Leanne's extended family had reportedly been informed of Joe's transition. Leanne stated that most of these family members have responded with acceptance, except for her paternal uncle, who responded with discomfort due to his lack of understanding about trans issues. Leanne stated that her uncle avoids the topic of Joe being trans and will sometimes use feminine pronouns.

### **3.2.2. Andre**

Andre is a 15-to-17-year-old cis male high school student. His interests include mechanics, political systems, psychology, law, reading, watching television, and fitness. Andre stated that he learned that transgender identities existed when he was around 12 or 13 years old, primarily through media exposure.

When I first heard about it, of course, I thought it was a bit weird, maybe, or different. But I didn't really think anything bad about it.

#### ***Family structure and relations***

Andre's immediate family additionally consists of his brother, Ryan (two to three years older than Andre), and his mother and father who separated about five years prior to the interview. Andre denied any adjustment-related issues regarding his parents' separation, stating that he "kind of saw it coming." Since the separation, Andre and Ryan have cohabitated with their mother until Ryan moved out a few months prior to the interview to attend university. Andre shared that when he and Ryan were children, their whole family unit occasionally did activities altogether, such as going to park or going fishing. Overall, Andre described a "nice" upbringing and very good relationships with both parents.

I remember growing up, I pretty much have nothing but good memories with both my mum and dad.

Regarding the family environment at the time of the interview, Andre described a “quiet” living environment with his mother and their two pets. He stated that he then spent time with his father nearly every weekend.

Andre described his parents as secular, with neither parent “show[ing] any religious belief” throughout Andre’s upbringing. Andre described his mother as socially liberal, “inclusive of everyone” and valuing equal rights. In contrast, he described his father as having “conservative” social beliefs and referred to him as “transphobic.”

### ***Brief profile of Andre’s trans brother and their dyadic relationship***

Andre described his brother, Ryan, as an 18-to-21-year old trans-male (AFAB; pronouns “he/him/his”). Andre described his relationship with Ryan as “pretty close” and “pretty good,” generally free from arguments. Andre felt that he and Ryan have common interests (e.g., sciences, sports, videogames). Further, Andre felt that he and Ryan have always seemed to be closer than most brother-sister sibling dyads. He shared that “it was kind of like [he] had a brother anyways” prior to Ryan’s transition. Andre described his and Ryan’s lives as “more separate and isolated” since Ryan’s move from the family home, but otherwise expressed indifference toward this change, adding that he enjoys “having more alone time.”

### ***Brief account of sibling’s transition***

Andre described Ryan as having a gender-nonconforming presentation from a young age and had identified as a “tomboy” before transitioning. Nevertheless, Andre did not previously consider the possibility of Ryan identifying as trans prior to his transgender identity disclosure.

Andre shared that he believes Ryan first came out as trans soon after graduating from high school. Andre stated that Ryan first came out to their cousin, and then came out to Andre about a year prior to the current interview. At the time of Ryan’s trans identity disclosure, he informed Andre of his chosen pronouns (“he/him/his”), requested that Andre refer to him as “brother” rather than “sister,” and informed him of his plans to immediately pursue gender-affirming hormone therapy, all in the same conversation.

Andre stated that, at this very point, he began to address Ryan using his chosen pronouns and began referring to him as his “brother.”

Within a few days, Ryan reportedly came out to his mother and requested that Andre and their mother refer to him by his chosen name, “Ryan.” It was reported that he subsequently pursued a legal name change.

Andre stated that Ryan mostly navigated his transition on his own, with some support from his friends, Andre, and his mother. To Andre’s knowledge, Ryan’s friends have been quite accepting of his transition. Andre stated that he felt that Ryan’s transition was still ongoing at the time of the interview.

### ***General family responses to Ryan’s trans identity and transition***

Andre stated that he has “kind of always been accepting” of his brother’s trans identity and currently views himself as “completely accepting.” He described his mother as supportive of Ryan’s transition. However, as described above, he characterized his father as “transphobic” and thus uninformed and “clueless” of Ryan’s trans identity. This has reportedly resulted in Ryan distancing himself from his father. Andre shared that, of his extended family members, only two similar-aged female cousins have been informed of Ryan’s transition and have responded with acceptance.

### **3.2.3. Quinn**

Quinn is a 30-to-35-year-old cis female mental health professional with post-secondary education. She expressed interests in the creative arts and athletics. Quinn identifies as queer and as a lesbian. She stated that her mother “was pretty unaccepting” at the time in which she came out. Quinn described herself as connected to the LGBTQ+ community and stated that she has friends who identify as trans. Quinn self-identified as culturally Jewish and shared that she is somewhat engaged in Jewish customs and practices.

### ***Family structure and relations***

Quinn stated that her immediate family consists of Shiloh (mid-twenties), her older sister, Erin (mid-to-late thirties), and her married mother and father. Quinn described her socioeconomic background as “middle class.” She described her

immediate family as very close and cohesive, and also quite “intense.” She reported shared family values of education and family loyalty, which she related to her paternal family’s Jewish heritage.

They're like, *never turn your back on your family. Family is the most important...* I totally relate it to this core value of: You never do anything against your family... You'd do anything for your family.

Quinn described a non-confrontational style of communication between family members:

One thing about my family is a lot of communication is very indirect... [I]f someone finds something out that maybe upsets them, they're not confrontational about.

Quinn moved while in university from the home of her family of origin. She has since maintained strong relationships and frequent communication with both her siblings. She described her sister, Erin, as an intellectual, concrete-minded individual, and the only one of the three siblings who identifies as straight. Quinn described her mother as socially-conservative and “very anxious.” She described her father as emotionally stoic and “very laidback in a very fundamental way where it could almost be annoying.”

Like, the ship could be sinking, and he'd just be barbequing on the deck. He's kind of that kind of person sometimes.

### ***Brief profile of Quinn’s nonbinary brother and their dyadic sibling relationship***

Quinn’s brother, Shiloh, was described during the interview as a gay, trans-male (AFAB; pronouns “he/him/his”) in his mid-twenties. During the member check, Quinn stated that Shiloh more closely identified as gender nonbinary at this time. Quinn described him as very kind, sweet, and an extremely shy, private person. His interests were reported to include cooking, music, psychology, reading.

Quinn described an extremely close and supportive relationship with Shiloh, described to be “more than [the degree of closeness than] in an average sibling relationship.” Until Quinn moved from the family home in her twenties, she lived full-time with Shiloh and the rest of the family.

Quinn shared that, prior to Shiloh’s transition, he had emotional difficulties relating to depressive symptoms, anxiety, and social withdrawal. Quinn described a positive feedback cycle between Shiloh’s emotional difficulties and his trans-related

difficulties (i.e., gender dysphoria and social stigma) in which both were exacerbated by one another. She added that she would “connect some of Shiloh's struggles with transition to Shiloh's struggles in general, with having grown up in a family where there's lots of anxiety.”

### ***Brief account of sibling's transition***

Quinn described Shiloh's gender presentation as unfeminine and androgynous since childhood.

...I remember when Shiloh was really young, people in the bank referring to him as my mom's son, and then my mum being not happy with that...

And I also remember jokingly calling Shiloh “Stevie” [*name modified as per pseudonym*] when I was young... It was never out of any sense of malice, just kind of joking 'cause Shiloh was just very boyish.

Quinn stated that Shiloh was teased by classmates due to his unfeminine gender presentation.

Quinn stated that she was the first family member to whom Shiloh revealed his trans identity, when Shiloh was in his early twenties and Quinn was in her mid-twenties. Quinn described Shiloh's coming out as “very natural,” adding that “It wasn't any kind of weird, dramatic thing...” Quinn had reportedly initiated this discussion by asking whether Shiloh had ever questioned identifying as trans, which led to Shiloh disclosing his trans identity. Quinn was asked by Shiloh to come out to their sister, Erin, on Shiloh's behalf.

I was the one who was assigned by Shiloh to tell my older sister that he was trans. He didn't want to tell her.

Quinn shared that Shiloh quickly became overwhelmed by his open identification as “trans,” which Quinn described as “crossing the Rubicon.” Quinn stated that Shiloh experienced confusion about his gender identity and “retreated” to terms such as “gender-neutral” and “gender-fluid,” temporarily using “they/them/their” pronouns.

I'd be like, “So, are you gonna transition?” And he's like, “No, I've decided that I am gender-neutral.” And I was like, “okay.” And I remember when he finally started testosterone, my best friend was just like, “Oh, thank god.” Because it had just been simmering for so long...

About a year after Shiloh came out as “gender-fluid” and “gender-neutral,” Quinn was caught by surprise when Facebook suggested to her that Shiloh was her “brother.”

... I remember when he changed his pronouns on Facebook because Facebook informed me I had a brother. [laughs]... And I was like, what the hell? And then I went to Shiloh's Facebook page on the info and saw that he had changed all his pronouns. And then I messaged him and was like, "Yeah, Facebook just told me I have a brother?" ... He was like, "L-O-L." ...I'm like, "L-O-L?"

A few years prior to the current study, when Shiloh was in his early twenties, he started on testosterone, which he discontinued a few months later. Quinn reported that following a six-month period off of "T" he restarted this treatment. By the time of the interview, had been on "T" for about one year. Quinn described having "had many very blunt conversations" about how hormone treatment would increase gender congruence, thereby reducing his emotional sensitivity and mental health challenges. However, Quinn felt Shiloh was not entirely ready to start "T" when he commenced this first course of treatment.

I feel like he wasn't really prepared for it emotionally... I don't think he understood, or maybe it wasn't explained enough what the effect emotionally would be... And, he was also just dealing with life stuff... [H]e felt like he was just trying to do too much stuff at once.

So, the first time he did it [went on testosterone] he crashed out and then got quite depressed and stopped taking it.

And so then he was just severely depressed for a year, and then it became more of a mental health thing, where it's like, "Oh, okay. Well you don't have to transition if that's too hard." And then he kind of came around to being like, "No, I want to transition and it's just about getting the right support in place." ... So this time, going back to the testosterone, 'cause it's kind of what he needs to do to continue his transition.

Quinn stated that Shiloh's current course of testosterone has gone much more smoothly and has resulted in him feeling happier and more emotionally stable.

During our member check, Quinn provided the update that Shiloh "more strongly" identified as nonbinary than during the previous participant interview meeting. Quinn attributed this to his increased comfort regarding his gender identity, largely attributable to his desired physical changes (deeper voice, broader shoulders, facial hair) associated with testosterone treatment.

## ***General family responses to Shiloh's trans identity and transition***

Overall, Quinn felt Shiloh's transition was somewhat stressful for her other immediate family members, especially for her mother and sister. She described family stress related to Shiloh's transition as well as his prior and concurrent emotional difficulties.

Her mother's response to Shiloh's trans identity was characterized by initial resistance followed by gradual acceptance, all the while complicated by an ongoing sense of grief regarding the impression that she had lost a daughter.

I think that my mom just kind of accepts it, that Shiloh is transitioning, but I'm not sure if my mom accepts everything that it means, in terms of having a son.

... She told me she had mourned for months and cried every day for three months over the loss of her daughter...

Quinn also described her mother's challenging and unsuccessful attempt to disclose Shiloh's trans identity to her own brother and ultimately choosing to conceal this information.

Quinn stated that her "father will be accepting [of Shiloh's trans identity] on principle, but struggles with [the] stigma" related to being trans. She described her father as having provided Shiloh practical and emotional support, sometimes to the point of over-involvement.

He'll kind of insert himself into situations out of concern, but he won't know when to leave... [M]aybe he'll invite himself, or maybe he'll ask if Shiloh wants him to come. And then, it's like, he'll get too involved. And then Shiloh doesn't know when to be like, "'Scuse me, this is my meeting. Will you leave?"

Quinn shared that her parents sought therapy services for parents of trans people and attended one supportive group. However, she described her mother as continuing to have difficulty processing Shiloh's transition.

[M]y mum has tried to reach out in different ways... I don't know how receptive she was to the perspectives she received in that group, but she did go.

I think that they would've benefited from more services. And I know that they really struggled with Shiloh... And Shiloh feeling like they were trying to get in the way of the transition or feeling threatened by that...

... I think my mum cares very deeply and is just completely unequipped...

Quinn stated that her sister, Erin, is generally an “inhibited person” who does “not [have] much exposure to [the] queer/trans community.” Quinn described Shiloh’s coming out as upsetting and “quite destabilizing” for Erin.

Quinn felt that her family’s socioeconomic stability contributed positively to Shiloh’s experience of coming out and transitioning, including his access to safe housing. Quinn shared that her family would never have rejected Shiloh due to being trans. She viewed this as important protective factor regarding a trans person’s well-being, within the lens of the family systems perspective.

#### **3.2.4. Vanessa**

Vanessa is a 15- to 17-year-old cis female high school student. Her interests include science, mathematics, music, and sports. In terms of her female gender identity, she stated:

I just identify as “she” and “her” just because it's just based on society. I just kind of follow the societal rules just because I don't really feel as though I need to challenge anything.

Vanessa stated that her personal aesthetic became more feminine as she grew up.

I feel like I was super sporty when I was growing up; didn't really care what I look like, wore a ponytail every day. But as I went through puberty, it changed into more of a-- I hate saying it-- but feminine style. I would wear make-up, care more about what I look like, and wear more skirts.

In terms of her sexual orientation, Vanessa stated that she is “not 100 percent straight, but not “50/50.” Vanessa described limited education regarding gender and sexual diversity while growing up.

...We never really talked about gender in a way... [M]y parents would just make it clear that it should be acceptable, and it should be accepted, kind of thing. And they would never, in a way, bring negativity to anything like that.

Vanessa described herself as involved with the LGBTQ+ community. She had previously been a member of her school's GSA (referring to her school's student-led organization of a Gay-Straight Alliance or, in some locations, a Gender and Sexuality Alliance). Vanessa stated that she has participated in a few events with her nonbinary sibling related to trans rights and education. Overall, she described herself as "more of a supporter rather than an activist."

### ***Family structure and relations***

Vanessa's immediate family additionally consists of her brother, Blake (pronouns "they"/"them"/"their") who is approximately two years older, as well as her married mother and father. Vanessa and Blake were raised in same household. Blake had recently moved out of the family home temporarily and would soon be moving out again.

Through most of Vanessa's childhood, her family lived in a small community which she described as "very wealthy," "very white and very Christian." There she was provided a high quality of education. During her early youth, their family relocated to a community which she described to be more socially progressive.

Vanessa stated that her family regularly eat dinner together and talk altogether. She described a relatively cohesive immediate family overall, with different and somewhat fluctuating levels of closeness in her and her brother's relationships with their parents. Vanessa was very close with her parents while growing up. However, she and her parents have recently had conflict pertaining to one specific issue. Vanessa shared that Blake's relationship with their parents was not close while growing up, which Vanessa partially related to their differences in values and Blake's gender minority identity. Vanessa described frequent arguments between Blake and their parents while Blake was in high school. She added that Blake tended to conceal information from them.

Vanessa described parents as "very liberal people" who "never really talked about gender" as a family, prior to Blake's coming out. She believes that her exposure to other cultures through her social experiences has been central to the development of her worldview.

I'd say my family background is definitely white and Christian, but I don't identify with that... I've met a lot of people from other cultures and

other religions, and that's broadened my knowledge on the world. But I would say family background doesn't contribute much. It's mostly my social experiences that have helped me learn a lot about other places and other cultures.

### ***Brief profile of Vanessa's nonbinary (trans-masculine) brother and their dyadic relationship***

Blake is a gender nonbinary (AFAB; pronouns “they/them/their”) post-secondary creative arts student in their early twenties. Vanessa stated that Blake identifies as trans, gender queer, and trans-masculine. With respect to Blake’s sexual orientation, they identify as pansexual.

So, they explained to me how “pansexual” is very different than “bisexual” because it includes every gender on the spectrum no matter how anyone identifies as. *It's you like a person, not a specific gender.*

Vanessa described Blake’s general attitudes as non-conformist.

Blake's always been a very, a rebellious kind of personality. They like to, like if they get assigned a project that they don't like, they'll do the project, but in a way that they know the teacher didn't ask them to do it... [T]hey're very much a “challenge authority” kind of person. So, I mean I'm not saying that being gender-queer is challenging authority, but I just—I’ve never really seen a structure in them.

Vanessa stated that she and Blake have some common interests, including politics and current events, as well as their music and television preferences. She described their relationship as historically close with frequent contact, but somewhat unstable, including the period in which the interview was conducted.

Obviously, we would get in fights all the time... And then once middle school came along, Blake and I distanced ... the closeness came back for a couple years... [We're not] really [close] anymore... Something happened recently that was a misunderstanding and caused a very large conflict in my family regarding me. But it's okay.

She also stated that she and Blake argue often, though Vanessa does not experience this as negative.

### ***Brief account of sibling's transition***

Vanessa described Blake as gender incongruent from a young age, although she admitted that prior to Blake’s transition, Vanessa “never really thought that deeply into it.”

[Blake] explained that they felt this way their whole life and they've felt not in the right body.

Unbeknownst to their parents at that time, Blake had difficulties fitting in socially within their school environment due to their gender-nonconforming presentation.

...[Blake] had a lot of struggles in high school 'cause they didn't really know who they were or what they were doing, and they felt out of place, kind of thing. They tried really hard to fit the girl image, in a way, in high school and it was really harsh on them. And my parents had no idea. And Blake didn't really seem to [have] the need to share anything.

Blake came out to Vanessa, and then to their parents, about two years prior to the interview, when Blake was around 17-19 years old and Vanessa was 14-16 years old. Blake had initially come out as "trans-masculine" and later began to self-identify as "gender nonbinary."

Blake just explained it. They said sometimes they feel like a girl; some days they feel like a boy. And their only goal is to not be either.

Vanessa described Blake's gender disclosure to Vanessa as "casual."

I didn't want to act like it was something crazy 'cause, you know, you wanna make them feel like it's obviously, it should be normal, so it's just a new thing about them.

Soon after Blake came out to their parents, they requested a pronoun change by the immediate family. Blake had initially asked that Vanessa refer to them as her "sibling," which Vanessa felt "awkward" about. With Blake's invitation and permission, Vanessa switched to the term "brother."

[T]hey don't want to be associated with "girl" anymore. And that's their biggest thing that they just want to avoid... I'm sure that Blake has had the conversation with my parents in terms of "son."

Blake is currently engaged in gender-affirming testosterone treatment, which they discussed causally with Vanessa. However, she and Blake have not discussed whether Blake plans to undergo any gender-affirming surgeries As Vanessa explained, "...I don't think it's my business."

Vanessa described Blake as highly involved in the trans and broader LGBTQ+ community. She shared that Blake became more involved in the larger LGBTQ+

community when they joined their GSA in high school. They are currently very active in the trans community.

[Blake is] passionate about the LGBTQ community and very much of an activist. They participate in a lot of marches, like the Pride march here, and just anything they can. They go to youth clubs and they have lots of friends who are also in the community.

Vanessa described Blake's friends as highly supportive of Blake's transition process.

...[T]heir friends are actually experiencing a lot of the same thing. They surround themselves with the [trans] community. They don't really have many cis straight friends. I'm probably their closest cis straight friend.

### ***General family response to Blake's trans identity and transition***

Vanessa characterized her immediate family as overall supportive and accepting of Blake's trans identity and transition. Vanessa stated that her parents did not experience any significant emotional difficulties associated with their acceptance of Blake's trans identity. Vanessa believes that her parents' liberal attitudes somewhat contributed to their overall ease in adjusting to Blake as trans. Nevertheless, Vanessa felt that her parents did experience Blake's gender transition as a "dramatic" shift. Vanessa believed that her parents were challenged by the grammatic structure of the singular "they" and by the task of re-conceptualizing Blake as gender nonbinary. Vanessa associated these difficulties with the fact that her parents belonged to a different cohort with less exposure to gender diversity than their children.

[T]hey do still say "she." Because when they think of Blake in their heads, usually not when Blake's there, when they think of Blake in their head, they think of, you know, the [fifteen to twenty] years before they transitioned. So they think of a girl. That was their explanation of having a hard time when Blake's not there. But when Blake's there, it's so much easier because they are "they" in a way.

Vanessa stated that her parents are interested in becoming more educated and involved in Blake's life, including their life as a trans person. For example, their father attended a trans pride march last year and is interested in continuing to participate in community trans-related events.

Vanessa stated that her immediate family visits their extended family about two to four times a year. She described one side of her extended family as challenging and somewhat unaccepting of Blake's trans identity, further discussed in section 4.8, below.

### **3.2.5. Lukas**

Lukas is a 15-to-17-year-old cis male high school student with interests in the humanities, athletics, and the expressive arts, in which he plans to pursue a career. He described himself as highly ambitious, self-motivated, independent, and analytical. He described his communication style as honest and direct. Lukas admitted that he tends to restrict emotional expression as a form of self-protection.

This is actually a bit of an issue with me. I am very in tune with my feelings, but I never express them. There's no feeling that I express more than frustration. But even that I don't express very much. I am generally a fairly straight-faced person, if I'm talking honestly. Otherwise, I sort of act like I'm a bit happier and funny; but really, I spend a lot of time with a stone-face... I've trained myself to think of most things objectively and indifferently.

Lukas reported that he maintains an extremely busy schedule given his academic, dramatic arts, and athletic extracurricular activities, and thus spends very little time at home.

Lukas shared that his family has always upheld the value of respect for all individuals, which Lukas himself advocated strongly throughout the interview.

My family's always been welcoming to most forms of LGBTQ—Actually all forms of LGBTQ. And it's not always something that we've thought about a whole ton. It's more: *Accept people as people.*

Lukas stated that he was only slightly educated about trans issues at school. He admitted that he personally did not reflect much on gender issues before or after his brother's transition.

#### ***Family structure and relations***

Lukas stated that his family additionally consists of his older brother, Brian (within four years apart), and their mother and father, all of whom cohabitated throughout Lukas's life. Overall, Lukas characterized his family environment as relatively fragmented, exacerbated by his parents' current commitments to Brian's transition

process and prior head injury (described below). Lukas identified his socioeconomic background as “upper class” and stated that his parents both have professional occupations. He described his parents as “quite liberal.” Lukas stated that his parents’ cultural backgrounds (undisclosed to protect privacy) have not had any significant impact on Lukas’s upbringing.

Lukas described himself as spending little time with his parents due to his demanding time commitments and his father’s work commitments. He stated that he became highly engaged in extracurricular activities during secondary school when “opportunity was abundant.”

### ***Brief profile of Lukas’s trans brother and their dyadic sibling relationship***

Brian was described as an 18-to-19-year-old (two to three years older than Lukas) trans-male (AFAB; pronouns “he/him/his”) high school graduate who, at the time of the interview, planned to pursue post-secondary education. His interests were described to include computer programming and anime. Lukas described Brian’s interests as quite narrow, somewhat exacerbated since his head injury. He shared that his brother’s interests have not changed or expanded since early adolescence, despite increased knowledge in these areas.

Lukas’s relationship with Brian was described as distant throughout their development, with no sense of emotional or social connectedness. When queried during member check, Lukas reported that this was likely exacerbated by both Brian’s head injury as well as his gender transition process.

...I’ve never really been particularly connected [to Brian]. I hate saying that, ‘cause it’s tragic, but it’s true... It’s sad that I’ve never really had a connection with my sibling. But, I *haven’t* really had much of a connection with my sibling.

I don’t know my brother very much better than I know an acquaintance... A fairly well-known acquaintance.

Lukas stated that he and Brian had limited communication and few shared interests.

We don’t connect with much more than a little bit of meme culture... It’s just the culture that creates internet memes, and that sort of thing... Somebody makes a joke that’s “in” that we would both get.

Lukas shared that when Brian was an early adolescent he experienced a traumatic brain injury (severity unspecified). Lukas also stated that he believes Brian to have some degree of undiagnosed autism. Lukas described Brian's pre-existing neurological and developmental issues as complicating Lukas's conception of Brian's gender presentation.

### ***Brief account of sibling's transition***

Lukas stated that, since childhood, Brian would dress like a "tomboy," which Lukas recognized as a reductionist label. He also got a short haircut soon after his head injury (about one and a half to two years prior to the interview) which Lukas recognized as the period in which Brian began to express gender incongruence. Lukas never questioned whether his sibling's gender presentation was indicative that he is in fact trans. He shared that he tended to attribute any behaviours that could be conceived as unexpected to his head injury.

In early adolescence, about one to two years prior to the interview, Lukas learned that Brian was trans. Lukas stated that, during a family vacation, his mother told him that Brian is trans, now identifies as male, and uses a new name ("Brian" was his chosen name). Lukas stated that he was unsure how long his parents were aware of Brian's trans identity prior to informing Lukas.

As Lukas indicated, Brian requested that Lukas use his chosen name, pronouns, and switch from calling him "sister" to calling him "brother" about a year and a half after Lukas was informed that Brian is transgender. Brian came out to his peers during high school, about a year prior to the current interview. Lukas stated that he was unsure how Brian's friends responded.

Lukas stated that Brian started gender-affirming testosterone treatment only a few weeks prior to the current interview. At the time of the interview, Lukas had not yet noticed any changes in Brian attributable to testosterone treatment. Lukas emphasized that Brian's transition was "not finished." He shared that Brian planned to begin university during the following semester as his affirmed male gender.

### ***General family response to Brian's trans identity and transition***

Lukas stated that his mother had initially responded to Brian's trans identity disclosure with shock, confusion, and increased stress. He shared that his mother questioned what it meant to be trans. However, with increased understanding came acceptance. Lukas characterized his mother as now "fully accepting" of Brian's trans identity. He stated that his father is still "reluctant" to accept Brian as trans but did characterize his father as "somewhat supportive" overall.

My dad still doesn't think it's a thing... He still doesn't think that "transgender" is really a thing. He's been supportive of it, but he still thinks it's a phase.

Both parents had engaged in some form of community support for families of trans people.

Lukas characterized his own attitudes toward Brian's trans identity as "indifferent." He denied his father's reluctance to fully accept Brian as trans as having any influence on his own perspective. He added that he "never thought it was [his] place to judge" his father for his views.

Lukas indicated that his extended family are all geographically distant and not relevant to his experience of Brian's transition.

Lukas stated that, within just a few weeks of his interview in the current study, he and his parents disclosed Brian's trans identity to their friends and greater community. Lukas described a carefully planned and calculated family process of coming out to their community on behalf of Brian. He stated that his mother shared the following advice, with which he agreed:

[M]y mother said to me, "Before we let this go out, I want you to have a strategy of how you're gonna deal with it." It took me less than a minute to figure that out... And it was, "Okay, you need to tell your friends before they find out. Otherwise they might judge you for it. It also says something in that you didn't tell them; it says, I don't trust these other people..."

Within the weeks prior to the interview, Lukas had informed seven of his friends that his brother is trans. He described immediate acceptance expressed by each of his peers, who responded with few further queries or discussions.

Everyone that I've told, everyone that my mother has told, everyone that beyond that is, "Oh, cool. Good for you."

### **3.2.6. Dani**

Dani is an 18- to 21-year-old cis female university student. She identified her sexual orientation as straight. She described herself as a stable, secure, and "very chill" person with diverse interests, including psychology. Dani stated that she is very close with her family, which holds great value to her along with her friendships. She described her gender presentation as stereotypically feminine, though she shared that she did dress as a "tomboy" when younger, emulating her older trans brother's aesthetic prior to his transition.

#### ***Family structure and relations***

Dani's immediate family additionally consists of: her older gay cis brother, Josh (mid-twenties, approximately two years older than Dani); her trans brother, Keith (mid-to-late twenties, four years older than Dani), and their married mother and father. Dani stated that she and her brothers were raised in the same household throughout their development. Dani continues to live with parents while Josh lives away during the school year. Keith had reportedly moved from the family home to live with his girlfriend (now fiancée) a few months prior to the current interview.

Overall, Dani described her immediate family as very close and cohesive. She reported strong dyadic bonds with each of her family members as well as strong functioning as a unit. She also described her family as highly communicative.

Not all families are this close. They don't all share all their feelings and everything. My mom just taught us to—if you're feeling upset, talk about it, right? So, not all families are like that. Some people hold their feelings back, and that just causes drifting, and, you know, estrangement.

Dani identified her cultural background as Canadian and Jewish but denied either of these cultural backgrounds as being significant to her personal sense of identity.

...We don't practice [Judaism] very much. We just do the high holidays, like Rosh Hashana. So that's sort of my religious background... But obviously, I still identify as Jewish and Canadian... [M]y dad, he grew up with more religiously strict parents. So, him compared to my mom, at least, is a little more, I want to say, orthodox. But he's not really. He still has learned to be very relaxed and lenient with us...

Dani is the youngest of her siblings and described herself as “the baby” of her family, suggesting that she is sometimes overprotected by parents and older siblings. She shared that she nonetheless feels a strong sense of confidence and independence.

Dani described her parents as quite lenient and generally open-minded. She stated that they did not impose gender-normative toys or activities on their children but were not raising them in any sort of intentionally gender-neutral fashion either.

... And all this information wasn't as prominent like 25 years ago... I don't think anyone really ever thought about that in my family.

Dani described a positive and supportive relationship with Josh (her middle brother), who identifies as gay. Dani described herself as supportive of his sexual orientation.

So, when he comes home, we'll hang out, we'll watch T.V., catch up, I'll go visit him... And he likes to drink, so we'll drink together.

### ***Brief profile of Dani's trans brother and their dyadic sibling relationship***

Dani's eldest brother, Keith, identifies as a straight trans-male (AFAB; pronouns “he/him/his”) in his mid-twenties. Keith is employed and has re-engaged with academic pursuits after beginning his transition.

... I think the transition probably sort of sparked that starting... I think it was important. He'll do something way more productive. My parents are happy too.

Dani described her relationship with Keith as somewhat close, but not to the extent that they share “secrets” with one another. She stated that they do things one-on-one and with their larger family. She described his peer network as “very supportive” of him. She also emphasized that they both highly value their relationships with their family and friends.

### ***Brief account of sibling's transition***

Dani stated that before Keith came out as trans, he presented as gender-nonconforming. Leading up to his transgender identity disclosure to his family, he had short hair and wore pants fashioned for men and a chest binder, to flatten the appearance of his chest. Dani stated that, before Keith came out as trans, he had come out as a lesbian in adolescence.

... I just wanted him to be happy... He actually said, "I'm gay." And I said, "okay" and just laughed. And he was on the phone the whole night with his girlfriend and it was just like that was what was supposed to happen.

Keith came out as trans in his mid-twenties, about one to two years prior to the current interview, during Dani's early teens. She shared that Keith came out to each family member individually on the same day, beginning with his mother. She described his coming out to her as casual and undramatic.

... It wasn't even like we sat down to talk. He just kind of mentioned, like, "Oh yeah, I'm trans." And I'm like, "Oh-kay...Good!"... [W]hen [my brothers] both came out as gay and lesbian, that was a family meeting. We all sat down. But when he came out as trans... it wasn't as huge a deal to him to have us all sort of sit there and stare at him...

Keith changed his name within a few weeks of coming out as trans. He gradually came out to his friends and extended family soon after coming out to his immediate family. Dani shared that Keith's trans identity was met with a great deal of support and acceptance from his friends and girlfriend [fiancée by the time of the member check].

...[H]is girlfriend is so accepting. She knows everything, and she already did [when they met]. So it wasn't a shock. And so, I see—when I look at them—true happiness, you know?

Keith engaged in gender-affirming medical interventions, which helped to reduce his gender dysphoria.

...You could see the relief when he was physically changing his body. Afterwards he was relieved to have those female characteristics gone; to identify more as male because it feels right.

[H]e had top surgery... [H]e wanted to be able to go swimming with no shirt on, and to not wear a binder and stuff like that... And it was a relief to him. Even though he was in pain for a while, it's worth it.

Dani stated that, by the time of the interview, Keith was perceived by others as "male."

You would never know if you saw Keith on the street, right? Never... And it took a while because, now he has facial hair. And at the beginning he didn't, and wasn't as bulky, because he wasn't on testosterone for as long.

Dani also recognized her family's socioeconomic privilege as beneficial in Keith's access to surgical care. Overall, Dani described Keith as having benefited significantly from transitioning.

He was like a whole new person.

### ***General family response to Keith's trans identity and transition***

Dani stated that her parents were initially somewhat surprised by Keith's coming out as trans and experienced some shock, having raised him a daughter previously.

... [I]t was a shock in the sense that it was something I think my parents weren't ready for. But it wasn't something that changed their entire world. It was just something they hadn't thought of before. But they adjusted to it really quickly as well.

Dani stated that Keith's coming out as a lesbian had required more adjustment by her parents than his coming out as trans, which was "more anticipated and took less adjustment." Dani stated that her parents had engaged in a support group for parents of trans folk.

I think [the support group] helped, at least with my dad... I think it helped him to see other parents who were going through the same thing.

Nevertheless, she reported that her parents did not have difficulties relating to Keith starting on testosterone or undergoing gender-affirming surgery. Dani did, however, describe her parents' worries about Keith's ability as a trans person to find a life partner. Dani felt that her parents were happy and relieved when Keith found a romantic partner who accepted him. Dani also felt her parents were relieved that Keith's transition did not interfere with his other (e.g., academic) life attainments.

She described her mother as extremely supportive and involved in Keith's transition process since he had initially come out. Dani shared that her mother immediately became involved in the trans community. After utilizing support group for parents of LGBTQ+ individuals, Dani's mother herself became involved in these support services.

Dani stated that her father took a few months to adjust to his son's trans identity. She believed her father's orthodox Jewish family background as relevant to his initial difficulty accepting Keith, prior to developing increased understanding and acceptance.

My dad, coming from having a strict father himself, at first the whole thing sort of didn't make sense to him... But now he's totally fine with it and used to it and, with how involved my mom is with all his stuff, he has to be supportive, or they would have a bit of an issue.

Dani described herself as involved in LGBTQ+ community and identified as an ally. She stated that she has trans and queer-identifying friends. After Keith had come out, Dani became involved in her school's GSA. During her local Pride Week celebration, she has attended the Trans March and other Pride events together with her whole family, including both her brothers (gay and trans, respectively) and her parents.

Overall, Dani felt that her immediate family was quickly supportive and accepting of her brother Keith's trans identity, his name change, as well as his girlfriend and her family.

Regarding her extended family, she stated that one of her grandmothers was immediately accepting, while the other was confused by Keith's pronoun change, and took time to adjust to "he/him/his" pronouns, during which Dani and her immediate family would provide corrective feedback.

### **3.2.7. Iris**

Iris is a 15- to 17-year-old cis female high school student. She described herself as a "girly-girl." As her brother came out when she was quite young (described below), she shared that this experience influenced her general personal identity.

...I just feel like I took that lesson from him because I can now be whoever I want... So being who I am is a really key lesson that I took from my brother... because he is who he is.

#### ***Family structure and relations***

Iris shared that her immediate family additionally consists of her mother, her father, and her twenty-something-year-old brother (biological half-brother), Jacob, who is more than 10 years older than Iris. Iris stated that, despite being half-siblings, Iris and Jacob share both parents, and that Jacob refers to the non-biological parent as his own. Their mother and father had reportedly separated and re-united several times (i.e., "on-and-off") throughout her development. Iris and Jacob live together and were raised in the same household, where they lived together most of the time, until Iris's later childhood/early adolescence, when Jacob moved away. At the time of the interview, Iris was reportedly living with her mother, while her father lived with them "most of the time."

Iris described her immediate family as close, quite cohesive, and communicative, as characterized by positive relationships between all family members, despite her parents' history of separation and reunion. Iris described values of openness and acceptance instilled by her parents, both generally and specifically in regard to gender expression. Iris shared that her parents did not teach her about gender diversity but have always demonstrated their full acceptance of another close family member who identifies as a minority sexual orientation.

Iris stated that her father is Christian while her mother is secular. Iris does not personally identify as Christian. She denied any personal relationship between religious views and her views of her sibling being trans. She shared that when she and her brother attended church during childhood, he tended to feel uncomfortable and eventually her mother and brother stopped attending. Iris denied any other significant cultural influences on her upbringing.

### ***Brief profile of Iris's trans brother and their dyadic sibling relationship***

Jacob is a gay trans male (AFAB; "he/him/his" pronouns) in his twenties. Iris described Jacob as caring, but not overprotective. She shared that they have an open style of communication, including their discussion around Jacob's transition and trans identity. Iris described a strong and close relationship with her brother, especially in spite of their 10-year age difference. Iris shared that they grew up engaging in family traditions together (e.g., decorating Easter eggs with their grandmother, dressing up as elves together on Christmas, etc.). After Jacob moved out to live on his own, Iris continued to spend time with him one-on-one, often simply "hanging out" at either of their homes, watching television together, and going shopping. However, Jacob has recently moved further away, and he and Iris have since been busy and have had less frequent contact.

### ***Brief account of sibling's transition***

Importantly, given their age gap, Jacob identified as trans through much of Iris's childhood. Regarding Jacob's gender presentation pre-transition, Iris shared that before she was born, the wedding of her parents was the last occasion in which Jacob wore a dress. Iris viewed this event as the start of Jacob's transition journey. Jacob subsequently wore more stereotypically masculine clothing, cut his hair shorter, and changed his name.

I think when he started wearing more full male clothes, that was the full transition. 'Cause he was already tomboy-ish, and then, went into full-on male clothes.

Iris shared that Jacob was previously a drag king performer prior to identifying as trans. He reportedly disclosed his trans male identity in his teens (when Iris was a young child) and concurrently changed his pronouns. Iris described learning that her brother was trans through discussions with her mother and subsequent discussions with Jacob.

Within a few years after coming out, Jacob changed his name from his birthname, started testosterone treatment, and underwent gender-affirming surgery. Iris described these masculinizing surgical interventions as playing an important role in reducing Jacob's body dysphoria and improving his confidence.

### ***General family response to Jacob's trans identity and transition***

Overall, Iris described herself as very supportive and accepting of brother's transition, but relatively uninvolved in his transition process. She shared that Jacob's transition was not particularly challenging for her.

I've heard so many stories about negative feedback from other people, and people getting bullied or beat up. But from what I know, Jacob had always had a good transition. It wasn't anything negative...

Iris does not personally identify as an "ally" or "advocate" of her trans sibling or the broader trans or LGBTQ+ community.

I just don't go into the world always talking [or] preaching to people that I am an ally on my own. If someone brings it up, then I'll expand further on it.

Iris shared that her mother immediately expressed support of Jacob's trans identity and is currently an active member of an organization for parents of LGBTQ+ individuals. She shared that her father initially lacked understanding of what it meant for Jacob to be transgender or the significance of his transition. However, Iris stated that her father currently shows strong support toward Jacob's trans identity.

...At the time, he wasn't as educated about it as my mum was with how Jacob felt like he was born in the wrong body. My dad just was like, "Usually you just stay with your gender. Why do you feel like you have to change?"

Iris shared that there was a transient period of parental conflict due to transition, including a related temporary separation soon after beginning of transition. Iris shared that this conflict has since resolved.

My mum was a little more involved [than my dad], which was one of the reasons that they split up, because my dad was a little hesitant at first. But he is full-on—He's perfectly fine with it now. It wasn't anything like, "Oh, I don't want you." It was still loving; it was just not as much as my mum wanted him to be involved with my brother. But he was still onboard...I think my dad had to hear [Jacob's] point of view... From him.

Much like her father, Iris described herself as similarly lacking understanding of Jacob's trans identity just following his disclosure. However, she described a gradual shift toward increasing acceptance, largely attributable to increased understanding of Jacob as transgender, as facilitated by both discussions with her mother and her exposure to his change in gender presentation. She described Jacob's change in clothing preferences to more masculine clothing as one of the most prominent changes in his presentation from her perspective, and a significant moment of realization for her regarding her understanding of his trans identity.

*So that was like, kay, this is who he is. He doesn't like girly clothes. He likes being in his male element.*

Regarding close members of her extended family, one of Iris's grandmothers knows of Jacob's trans identity and has been supportive in reaction to this. Iris shared that she and Jacob regularly see their other grandparents, but she does not know if they are supportive of Jacob's trans identity.

### **3.2.8. Phoebe**

Phoebe is a 15-to-17-year-old cis female high school student who identifies as pansexual. Her interests include visual arts, creative writing, poetry, and spoken word. At the time of the interview, she was working part-time in a job related to the creative arts.

Preceding her sibling's gender-nonconforming identity disclosure Phoebe described having exposure to gender diversity issues through online information, gender studies coursework, and involvement in her school's GSA. She shared that her education of gender diversity issues was later enhanced by her sibling's gender

transition. Moreover, Phoebe shared that she identifies as an ally of the trans community.

Phoebe stated that she had made concerted efforts to reject pressure to conform to traditional feminine gender roles and gender presentations, consistent with her unconventional and progressive values.

... I don't believe that a woman has to subscribe to any theory of being a woman. So, everything that I don't like about being a woman, which is being treated as fragile, being treated as not-good-enough... being passive, being submissive. I don't like all of those things. I don't like that people see me as that.

Phoebe shared that she has had a romantic relationship with someone who also has a TGN sibling. Phoebe felt this romantic relationship to be mutually supportive regarding their siblings' transitions.

...They bonded over all of the masculine things, like drinking beer, and going for hikes... and talking about how dumb gender roles are. And me and Peyton do that too, but it's just like one is masculine and one is feminine...

### ***Family structure and relations***

Phoebe's immediate family additionally includes her 18-to-21-year-old sibling, Peyton, (one to three years older than Phoebe), and their married mother and father. Phoebe and Peyton cohabitated throughout their entire development.

Phoebe characterized her parents as generally supportive of their children, although she referred to difficulty having honest discussion with father about personal issues. She described her immediate family as close, which tends to result in some degree of family tension and conflict.

[W]e're all really close to each other, which is good because it creates more opportunity for good things, but it also means we're in each other's business all the time and it creates more opportunity for conflict.

Phoebe described her mother as open-minded and socially progressive, despite her lacking understanding of trans issues (as described below). She did not describe any cultural/religious/socioeconomic factors significant to her family's experience of Peyton's transition.

Phoebe stated that Peyton spends more time with their mother than Phoebe, as Peyton and their mother both spend much of their time at home. Phoebe described herself as generally spending more time with her father, outside of the family home. She shared that she admires her father as a peaceful and diplomatic nature.

### ***Brief profile of Phoebe's nonbinary sibling and their dyadic sibling relationship***

Peyton was described as an 18-to-21-year-old gender nonbinary (AMAB; "they/them/their" pronouns) high school graduate. Like Phoebe, Peyton is interested in the creative arts. Phoebe described Peyton as passionate about trans discourse and social justice and an active member of the queer community.

Phoebe described Peyton as "passive-aggressive," which she related to Peyton's frequent remarks and discussions about gender minority identity issues. Phoebe shared that, growing up, her and Peyton would frequently argue, a pattern which she felt to have intensified following Peyton's transition.

... [I]t's not necessarily like I'm acting differently, but it's just like maybe I'm feeling the pressure more *to* act differently, or they're reacting differently [since coming out as nonbinary].

Nevertheless, Phoebe described having recently experienced less conflict in her relationship with Peyton than previously and described a close relationship overall, consistent with their tight-knit family.

### ***Brief narrative of sibling's transition***

Phoebe stated that, prior to Peyton's initial coming out, their gender presentation was not notably inconsistent with their assigned male gender. She felt that Peyton only began to experience gender dysphoria in mid-adolescence and began to exhibit more apparent distress after coming out. However, after their coming out, Phoebe learned that, as a child, Peyton would privately dress up in his mother's clothing.

Phoebe described Peyton's gender identity disclosure as occurring progressively and still ongoing at time of the study.

[Peyton] thinks in grey areas, not black and white, and has been struggling with gender a lot and feeling somewhere in between being a guy and being a girl.

Phoebe shared that about a year prior to the study interview, Peyton had first come out to her, stating that they wanted to wear more stereotypically feminine fashion, absent of any explicit gender identity.

So, they came out to me first not being “not a guy,” but they came out to me first being like, “I just want to wear dresses. And I think that’s just a thing that I want to do, but I’m still a boy though, so no need to worry.” ... [They] came out saying that they wanted to just experiment with female clothing and presenting themselves as more feminine.

During this initial gender identity disclosure, Peyton reportedly told Phoebe that they wanted to wear dresses but assured her that they were “still a boy.” Phoebe highlighted that Peyton had come out to her before coming out to anyone else, including their peers.

I was the first one they told about wanting to wear dresses; I was the first one they told, however briefly it was, of wanting to question their gender...

At this point, Peyton started to wear stereotypically feminine clothing and grow their hair long.

Phoebe stated that, during one summer during high school, Peyton came out as “questioning” their gender and wanting to wear dresses. Phoebe described a period in which Peyton was quite secretive around their parents about their more feminine gender presentation.

... [A]s time went along, it kind of became this secret that only I knew about in my family, and they were hiding it a lot from my parents... I remember one family dinner when my mom was like, “Are you wearing make-up?” And then they were like, “No.” And they were trying to hide their face ‘cause they hadn’t wiped their make-up off fully yet. And it became this really big secret... So, this went on for about six months...

Phoebe felt Peyton’s concealment of their trans identity from their parents further contributed to Peyton’s distress.

It just seemed stressful, hiding a secret like that... I can imagine how that would be stressful if I felt like my parents wouldn’t approve of something that I was doing that was not just me being a rebellious teen, but that was such an integral part of my identity. That doesn’t sound very fun.

... [B]efore they came out to my parents, it was kind of manifesting in other ways. The fact that they weren’t “out” yet presented as a very serious mental health problem and my parents were just kind of

spinning. They'd put them [Peyton] in counselling. They'd tried all these different things. They were trying really hard to help, but they didn't know it was because of the gender, right?

Phoebe stated that Peyton did not identify publicly as gender-nonconforming during high school, and had only told a few close peers of his gender identity at the time. Phoebe emphasized that there was a definitive period during high school during which Peyton's distress relating to their gender nonbinary identity became apparent to her, representing a change from Peyton's previous presentation of being happy and fitting in socially.

... [W]hen Peyton was in grade [redacted], they were really cool; they were really happy; all their friends were lesbian stoners... They were super happy, and they were super cool, and they [would] listen to cool music. And they weren't unhappy in any way... [I]t's just different now.

Phoebe recalled the moment Peyton came out to her as "nonbinary."

... I was going to leave for a summer camp actually. Right before I left, my sibling was like, "Just so you know, I've kind of been thinking that I'm not really a guy anymore." And I was like, "I figured."

Peyton reportedly requested that their parents use "they/them" pronouns sometime in high school. Peyton has thus far retained their birth name. Phoebe stated that she currently refers to Peyton as her "sibling," whereas she had previously referred to them as her "brother" before their gender identity disclosure.

... [I]t's been kind of like a weird in-between stage right now, where they're not really my brother, but not my sister... I just want them to move out and figure it out and come back.

At the time of the interview, Peyton was reportedly in the process of initiating hormone treatment.

... Peyton's going to the youth clinic to go on estrogen... It hasn't started yet... They're still kind of awkward about it. And they're still learning.

Phoebe shared that, by the time of the current interview, Peyton identified as both "gender nonbinary" and "trans-feminine." Phoebe stated that Peyton eventually came out to their parents as "nonbinary" before switching to gender-neutral pronouns. Phoebe shared that, over the months prior to the interview, she had suspected that Peyton identified as a trans woman rather than "nonbinary"; however, at the time of the interview, Peyton had not yet come out to Phoebe as such. Moreover, Phoebe felt that Peyton was still in the process of consolidating their gender identity.

... So, I think the process of coming out is still definitely going on. I think they've kind of changed from nonbinary to trans-feminine, but not necessarily a trans woman. And yeah, for me, I guess I just feel like they need to move out. I feel like, they've been living at home—They've graduated now, and they've been living at home for like a year and a half and I think it's just been really hard for them 'cause they're still kind of living under the shadow of my parents and still looking to my parents for guidance, I guess.

Well, in this kind of awkward in-between stage of them just wanting to wear dresses to them questioning their gender to them being nonbinary to them going to trans-femme...

Overall, Phoebe described positive quality-of-life changes for Peyton as a result of their progression through their transition.

There's definitely been a positive shift. And I think it's coincided with Peyton going to the youth clinic... [S]tarting to start the process of getting accepted to go on hormone replacement therapy coincided with Peyton applying to go to universities, with Peyton starting to go by "she" pronouns more in different areas of the community which they have started doing.

Phoebe also shared her expectation that Peyton's emotional pain associated with their transition will gradually subside.

...[I]t's not a steady like, *okay, I'm better, I'm cured now*, but it's more like it's [Peyton's gender dysphoria is] just gonna slowly fade from our memory that Peyton was ever... in this awkward in-between stage... It's just gonna slowly get less bad and it's just gonna slowly get better. And we're in the middle of that right now.

### ***General family responses to Peyton's trans identity and transition***

Phoebe described Peyton's nonbinary identity disclosure and current transition process as a somewhat challenging experience for both Peyton and their family; although, difficulties relating to this adjustment have decreased over time. She depicted her father's response to Peyton's transition thus far as follows:

[H]e doesn't have any disagreements with Peyton's gender. He also doesn't have any agreements. He's kind of just like, "You can identify as whatever you want, but you gotta get a full-time job and you gotta go to school" ... Like, "Peyton's got to go on hormones," "Peyton's got to go by 'they/them' pronouns," "Peyton's got to go to counselling..." My dad has no problem with that, as long as it's making them healthy, that's good.

Phoebe also shared her belief that her father lacks trans-related knowledge, representing some limitations on his ability to demonstrate support for Peyton.

Phoebe regarded her mother as accepting of Peyton's nonbinary identity, but not with trans-feminine gender expression. At the time of my interview with Phoebe, her mother was reportedly attending a support group for parents of trans individuals. Overall, Phoebe depicted her mother's response to Peyton's ongoing transition as falling short of full acceptance.

She's okay with it, but also, she's not okay with it at the same time. It's kind of just a point of awkwardness, I guess, between the two of them. 'Cause Peyton's just been like, "Yeah, I'm doing this, mom... You can't stop me." And my mom's like, "Yeah, okay. Will I get a chance to talk to the doctor?"

Overall, Phoebe describe both her parents as partially supportive of Peyton's nonbinary gender identity disclosure and expression, with some limitations.

### **3.2.9. Mia**

Mia is a 15-to-17-year-old cis female. She was raised and living in Vancouver, where she was attending high school at the time of the interview. Mia described herself as an "old soul" with a "childish" sense of imagination. She views herself as very positive, loyal, and "emotionally intelligent" individual who highly values her friends and family. Her interests include reading, social justice, the dramatic arts, writing, and skiing.

Mia shared that she has been involved in GSA since early adolescence, even prior to her sister, Parker, coming out as trans. She shared that her involvement in the GSA played an important role in her education around gender diversity. Mia described herself as an ally of the LGBTQ+ community, actively educating herself and resisting witnessed acts of discrimination.

I used to be a very shy, kind of sad, person... I think a lot of things I've done in my life have shaped me to be this completely different person than I used to be—GSA, Parker, and just a lot of things bringing out qualities inside me that I already had.

### ***Family structure and relations***

Mia shared that her immediate family additionally consists of Parker (8-11 years old; transgender sister), Jason (12-to-14 years old; cis-male brother), and their parents (mother and father; married); who all live together. Mia described her Western European heritage (specific national heritage removed), which she values preserving culturally. She identified as secular and denied any family religious beliefs or practices significant to her upbringing.

Mia described having positive relationships with both parents. She described her mother as a “caring, giving, kind of easy-going person. She’s very loving. So just kind of this unconditional love...” She described spending less time with her father than she had earlier during childhood but shared that she and her father are “working back to getting that relationship.” She shared that she and her family often participate altogether in activities such as hiking, dining out, watching movies, and travelling. Overall, she described her family as very close and cohesive.

... I’ve always thought that we were kind of a special family because we’ve been so close... People aren’t sitting up in their rooms while the rest of the family’s doing something... [B]eing a very close family and a loving family is valued by everybody in my family.

### ***Brief profile of Mia’s trans sister and their dyadic sibling relationship***

Parker is an 8-to-10-year-old trans girl (AMAB). Regarding her gender identity, Mia clarified:

She identifies as transgender, but that’s just part of her. I think the bigger part is that she’s a girl.

I guess she had more of a softer demeanor; she was more feminine. But at the same time, she was feisty because she would take all that hate from kids at school during the day and bottle it up and then explode with anger later.

Mia described a strong, extremely close, and harmonious relationship with Parker, adding that they often played with dolls together, which they both enjoyed.

... I was kind of exhibiting all of the features, or aspects, of the person that she kind of wanted to be like. I was quite feminine at the time, and I had all these very girly toys, and a girly room. And so, I think that she just kind of enjoyed being around me because I was like that and she wanted to be like that and be a girl.

### **Brief narrative of sibling's transition**

Mia characterized Parker's gender presentation as stereotypically feminine (i.e., gender nonconforming) since early childhood.

[S]he was acting like a girl ever since she could walk and talk...I was a very kind of "girly-girl," if we use that term... [S]he'd come to my room and play with my stuff, and she'd take my clothes and my princess costumes... And she'd wear my dresses...

[W]hen I was very young, I could tell that it was different... I guess most boys do play with girly things when they're younger. But Parker never, I guess, "grew out of it," as you would say. And it never bothered anyone in my family; like, it didn't bother my parents, it didn't bother my brother, and it didn't bother me that she was doing this. We all thought it was pretty cute and we loved it, and we were just like, *oh, she's just doing what she wants to do. Let her do it. Because it's making her happy.*

Mia shared that she and her other family members had never conceptualized Parker in a particularly gender-binary context.

... I never thought of her as my brother or my sister. She was always just "Parker" to me and my sibling. So, I used male pronouns 'cause she was biologically born a boy, and it was like, *okay, I'm just using this so I can call you something, but it really doesn't matter to me what I call you.*

At other points in the interview, Mia shared that her family tended to view and accept her as more feminine.

Parker was not officially seen as a girl in my family, but I guess we kind of all subconsciously thought of her as a female because she was acting that way around us all the time...

Mia shared that before Parker began to identify as transgender, there was a period during childhood in which she questioned whether she was a gay male. Mia took this information at face value and responded with non-judgmental questions. Mia described the process whereby she would teach Parker new terminology learned through her involvement in her school's GSA regarding sexual and gender identity, which ultimately helped Parker recognize herself as transgender.

And I was going to this [GSA] club, and I was hearing all these friends who were like, *maybe that's what Parker is identifying as, but not really realizing.* So I was going home, and I would tell her what I'd learned, and she'd be like, "Mm, yeah, that makes sense."

Mia shared that Parker came out to her immediate family one-to-two years prior to interview, between the ages of seven and eight years old, when Mia was 13-to-14 years old. Parker's coming out process was described as nonchalant.

It wasn't where we gathered everyone to have a special meeting about it. It was just brought up in a conversation and then moved on from, and then brought up another time, and things like that. We could have been talking about anything the way we were talking about it, and the way it was brought up.

Mia also described her family's conversations with Parker regarding pronouns.

...[A]t first, Parker didn't really know what she wanted to do. She didn't know if she wanted to *be* a "girl," 'cause she was so used to being called "him" ... [T]here were certain things that she couldn't do as a boy 'cause it wasn't acceptable in society. Like, at her school, she couldn't grow her hair past her collar. So that was a bit of an issue for her, 'cause she really wanted long hair...

Soon after, Parker's trans identity was disclosed to her maternal grandparents. Mia stated that her grandparents "did not have a hard time adjusting at all." She added that their only difficulty was remembering to use Parker's pronouns ("she/her/hers").

During the summer after disclosure of her female identity, Parker began to use "she/her/hers" pronouns, both within the family and public spheres.

But she actually made the decision that she wanted to be a girl a year before that. So for a year, she still had to pretend to be a boy when she decisively wanted to be a girl.

Regarding Parker's school transition, Mia shared that Parker had previously attended an all-boys' school, where he wore the school uniform. Mia stated that Parker was teased and bullied by her classmates.

[Parker] was being discriminated against and she was being bullied at school just because kids could tell she was different... [S]he would take all that hate from kids at school during the day and bottle it up and then explode with anger later... Like, if my parents got upset with her for doing something, then she'd get overly upset, or have a huge reaction... Sometimes she'd let it out at school and get in trouble... [S]he'd come home and tell us about how some kid beat her up at school, or how somebody was choking her or tackling her... And that was hard for me 'cause I wasn't there to help her.

Mia also stated that Parker experienced harsher discrimination before she transitioned.

...[N]ow, people would discriminate against her maybe because she's transgender. But back then it was because, *okay, you're a boy. Why are you acting in a way you're not supposed to be acting?*

Mia stated that Parker's classmates did not know she was transgender but, a little prior to coming out publicly, a few close classmates learned that she sometimes dressed stereotypically feminine and were unbothered by this. Mia shared that although Parker was rarely seen by members of the school community or public dressed as a girl, "anytime after school, when she was out in public, she would dress like a girl. Or at home, she'd dress like a girl."

Mia shared that she was actively involved in her parents' process of selecting a new school for Parker after coming out as trans, as she would no longer be permitted to attend her previous all-boys' school as a girl.

I could tell it was hard for her and that she wanted to be a girl, but there were multiple things restricting her from doing that... And it was definitely hard for her to leave her friends and her school.

... [My mom was considering] a private school for different kids; I think some of them had autism or dyslexia... I'm sure it was a very supportive environment... But we wanted Parker, again, to feel like she was a girl, not that she was some special kid that was identified as transgender... I said to [my mom], "You know what, it would probably just be better for her to be with the other kids and in a bigger school with more kids..."

Ultimately, her parents decided that Parker would attend a public school in the interim, before attending Mia's school as her affirmed female gender, after undergoing the school's formal intake process.

Mia stated that Parker and her family had future plans to eventually start hormone blockers, for which she had recently begun to be followed medically.

Mia recognized her unusually acute insight into her sibling's transition experience, particularly given her developmental age. She described herself to be very much involved in Parker's transition and related decision-making. She stated that her involvement was both self-initiated and invited by her parents.

...[M]y mom was always keeping me updated 'cause she knew it was very important to me to know. And I feel like both my parents didn't really know what they were doing. And my mom would be talking to me and asking my opinion. And sometimes I'd say, even if she didn't ask, "You know what, mum, we really shouldn't do that." Just because I was

in GSA... and learning more about the transition process... And just kind of considering Parker as an individual and what would be better for her.

For example, Mia stated that her mother had wanted to send Parker to a very small private school. However, Mia believed that Parker would not thrive in such an environment. Mia added that conversations with her mother about Parker would include mutual validation: "When my mom would come and talk to me about certain things or decisions, we would validate each other, but in a very chill way."

Overall, Mia described her immediate family as "very supportive" and very accepting of Parker's nonconforming gender expression prior to identifying as a girl.

[N]either of my parents had that moment where they doubted Parker... My parents have always just let Parker be who she was before she decided to transition, so I think that was very important. And I don't think there was any period of time where they ever forced her into something while they decided to make that decision; there was nothing like that. We just kind of let Parker do what made her happy...

Mia also shared that her parents sought resources to assist in Parker's transition even before it formally began. Such resources were reported to include books, documentaries, and discussions with another family with a transitioning family member. Mia and her family also attended a few queer and trans community events.

### ***General family responses to Parker's trans identity and transition***

Mia shared her belief that her family endured some challenges secondary to stigma against trans folk, emphasizing that these challenges did *not* relate to any difficulties accepting Parker as a girl or as trans.

Mia shared that the most difficult aspect of her experience of Parker's transition was, with her family, navigating difficult practical decisions regarding the transition in effort to choose those which would be best for Parker.

... [T]here wasn't a book we could read that would tell us what to do, or anything or anyone we knew we could talk to figure it out. We kind of just felt like we were on our own figuring stuff out and kind of doing it from scratch...

Mia described some continual adjustment by her brother, Jason, characterized by some social distance due to their opposite gender-stereotypic activity preferences, as well as some sense of loss.

[T]he relationship between Jason and Parker I think changed the most... [T]hat ["brother" versus "sister"] label... it was kind of the last thing where Jason totally lost his brother, was when we changed that label... And the label was a very definitive separation... But nobody's really had a "problem" with it. I think he's just a little bit disappointed, or kind of shocked, from losing that relationship very quickly.

Mia described her extended family as very supportive of Parker's transition. She noted that her grandparents did have difficulties adjusting to Parker's change of pronouns, which Mia would correct.

### **3.2.10. Celeste**

Celeste is a 15- to 17-year-old asexual cisgender female high school student, living in a suburb of a large Canadian city. She shared that her interests include the humanities, particularly social justice issues, gender issues, sexuality, women's studies, psychology, and sociology. She stated that her interests include the expressive arts, mysticism, and fashion. Celeste described herself as quite reserved and emotionally restrained, highly responsible, and "maybe even self-sacrificing."

Celeste identified as a trans ally and advocate of the LGBTQ+ community. She stated that, preceding her sister's transition, Celeste became highly engaged in queer social justice work as well as her school's GSA.

... I've gone to Pride parades with school and I've presented different stuff to the teachers... Education on gender identity and sexuality... And I've been doing that for a long time.

Celeste's stated that her self-reflection on her interest in the queer community led to her realize that she herself identified as asexual. She described her personal aesthetic as androgynous.

#### ***Family structure and relations***

Celeste stated that her immediate family additionally consists of: Nico, Celeste's fraternal twin sibling who was assigned male at birth; their sister (two to three years younger); their mother and father, separated over five years prior to the interview; and, each parent's domestic partner (i.e., her father's girlfriend and her mother's boyfriend).

Celeste described an arrangement in which she and her siblings alternated between living with each parent, with inconsistent schedules since her parents' separation. She described Nico as having closer relationship to their mother than their father, partially because she spent relatively more time in their mother's family home.

Celeste described a relatively fragmented and conflictual immediate family dynamics, related to having a reconstituted family, including parental cohabitation on both sides. Celeste described increased tension in her relationship with her mother over the course of Celeste's development. She also described both her mother's and father's family units as relatively emotionally distant and restrained in their emotional communication, contrasting with their otherwise liberal and "unorthodox" family values.

Celeste described herself as having a significant role as a caretaker in her maternal family unit, second to her parents, since childhood. She described herself as being assigned this role rather than her twin sibling because she had always been recognized as more responsible than Nico, and less involved in after-school activities that would interfere with these duties.

With regard to her family's cultural background, Celeste denied having any particular cultural identification. She did not feel that her family's religious background had any major impact on her family or her upbringing.

Celeste believed that her parents worked to provide their children with educational resources despite some financial limitations. Celeste described both her parents' open-minded and non-conventional attitudes toward gender expression.

We come from a pretty open family... I never really got an imposed gender binary from my parents... And so, we were never really told, "You're a boy. You have to wear this," or, "You're a girl. You have to wear this." And so, personally, I felt I was allowed to explore what I wanted "feminine" to look like for me. And I think Nico [her trans sister] has the same experience...

Celeste also shared that she has other queer-identifying extended family members, which contributes to her extended family's "unorthodox" attitudes toward gender diversity.

### ***Brief profile of Celeste's trans sister and their dyadic sibling relationship***

Nico is a 15- to 17-year-old trans girl (AMAB; "she/her/hers" pronouns). Her interests include sports, technology, and music. Celeste stated that she and Nico have quite different interests.

I was also never one for sports. Nico was into sports; I wasn't into sports. I was always more artistically inclined.

Celeste described their overall level of closeness as "not distant but at the moment not particularly close either," which related to recent period of significant interpersonal conflict.

We have a tumultuous relationship. We deal with things differently. I've always had more responsibility.

Celeste also stated that her and Nico have different primary peer groups. Nevertheless, Celeste stated that she believes that others expect them to have a close relationship because they are twins.

Celeste described both her and Nico as having histories of mental health issues (depression and anxiety). She shared that Nico also has emotional dysregulation issues, as well as social and behavioural issues, which she believed to be largely related to difficulties associated with her trans identity.

### ***Brief narrative of sibling's transition***

Celeste shared that, since Nico's early development, she predominantly conformed to a stereotypically masculine presentation, consistent with his male sex assigned at birth.

... Nico really liked baseball and ball hockey and rough-housing, and all things that society deems "masculine" ... And so, I think what shocked a lot of people in my family was that Nico was saying, "Oh, I'm female"  
...

Celeste stated that she was the first family member to whom Nico came out, occurring while they were in their mid-teens, three to four years prior to the current interview. Celeste stated that initially Nico identified as a demi-girl and as gender-fluid before coming out as transgender a few months later. Celeste described Nico's transgender identity disclosure as casual and spontaneous. During this disclosure, Nico

had asked to be addressed by Celeste as her “sister.” Celeste added that she sometimes uses the alternative term, “sibling” or “twin.” Nico maintained her birthname since commencing her transition. Celeste shared her belief that Nico “really struggle[d] with gender dysphoria.” Nico reportedly start feminizing estrogen treatment within the year prior to the current interview.

### ***General family responses to Nico’s trans identity and transition***

Celeste stated that she responded to Nico’s gender identity disclosures with immediate acceptance, which she attributed to her personal interest and growing understanding of queer identities. Celeste stated that she continues to have a fully accepting attitude toward Nico as trans. However, she described her degree of involvement in Nico’s transition process as “relatively low.”

Celeste indicated that her other immediate family members responded nonchalantly to Nico’s coming out and have been “very accepting” of her as trans, which Celeste related to her family’s open attitudes toward gender diversity.

Celeste shared that her father is currently very accepting of Nico’s trans identity, but “had a little trouble with it at first, just because Nico had never said it [to our father].” She went on to explain that she believed her father felt hurt because he was informed of Nico’s trans identity months after her other immediate family members.

At the time of the interview, all of Celeste’s extended family members were reportedly aware of Nico’s trans female identity. She stated that all three of her grandparents had been informed and were quite supportive of Nico’s trans identity. During the member check, Celeste added in writing, “I think it challenges their upbringings, but they want to accept her because they love her and want to support her.”

#### **3.2.11. Maxine**

Maxine is an 18- to 21-year-old cis female university student. She reportedly lived in a socially liberal city in the United States before moving with her family to mid-sized Canadian city during childhood. Maxine described herself as quite shy. She shared that she is interested in sciences, languages, and world histories, and personally values psychological wellness.

### ***Family structure and relations***

Maxine's immediate family additionally consists of: her brother Eddie, who is in his mid-teens and three to four years younger than Maxine, and their married mother and father. Her family lived altogether throughout Maxine's upbringing. During the academic year prior to the current interview, Maxine was living out-of-province to attend university.

Maxine described her immediate family as close and cohesive, often engaging in activities altogether. She described her mother as a well-educated professional [occupation redacted]. She described her father as s a stay-at-home dad who monitored and assisted with Eddie's homeschooling. Maxine felt that her parents' non-traditional gender roles contributed significantly to her own openness with respect to gender attitudes and beliefs. Maxine described significant past family challenges regarding her father's past alcohol abuse (since resolved) as well as Eddie's history of emotional difficulties (since improved). She described a currently positive family atmosphere.

Maxine shared that she was widely exposed to sexual minority identities, but not gender diversity, while growing up. She described her family heritage as North American and European. Maxine shared that, at the time of the interview, she and her parents did not identify as religious.

### ***Brief profile of Maxine's trans brother and their dyadic sibling relationship***

Eddie is a trans male high school student in his mid-teens who was home-schooled at the time of Maxine's interview. Maxine described Eddie as fun, funny, shy, quite private, and temperamental. She reported that Eddie's gender transition experience was complicated by pre-existing mental health issues, including features of autism spectrum disorder (previously recognized as *Asperger's syndrome*, in accordance with the DSM-IV-TR; American Psychiatric Association, 2000), compounded by mood difficulties and a learning disorder. Eddie had reportedly received treatment for emotional support for his comorbid mental health issues, and later, for his gender identity concerns.

Maxine described a very close relationship with Eddie. She shared that they "have so much fun together" but often argue. She shared that they often spend time together engaged in their own independent activities, such as reading. Maxine stated

that she felt a longstanding sense of responsibility for Eddie's wellbeing, which becoming more pronounced during Eddie's transition.

### ***Brief narrative of sibling's transition***

Maxine stated that Eddie "expressed feeling like a boy when he was little." Further, she described Eddie's gender presentation as nonconforming since early childhood.

So, right from when my brother could choose how to dress, he wanted short hair, he wanted to shop in the boy's section. But for a very long time, he was just a tomboy... But I think that the main reason he did that was because he didn't know that being transgender was an option.

Although Eddie's other emotional issues were being addressed by mental health professionals prior to his transgender identity disclosure, Maxine stated that none of these professionals had ever questioned whether he was experiencing gender identity concerns.

That [process] was all my mom researching things and figuring things out herself.

Maxine shared that Eddie began to question his gender identity in early adolescence. In junior high school, Eddie came out as gender nonbinary, with the support of a school counsellor and school administrators. During the following school year, he began using "they/them/their" pronouns both at school and at home and began using "he/him" pronouns within the months to follow. Eddie was bullied at school due to his gender nonconformity and his later identification as gender nonbinary. This bully victimization resulted in an exacerbation of emotional difficulties. Eddie was thus removed from the public-school system to be homeschooled.

Eddie started testosterone treatment in mid-adolescence, approximately one year prior to interview. Resultant physical changes reportedly including deepening of voice, increased body hair, and increased muscle mass and definition. Maxine shared that, by the time of the interview, Eddie fully presented as male: "Eddie looks very much like my brother. Nobody would question otherwise..." According to Maxine, Eddie has chosen to live as trans privately (i.e., not publicly identifying as trans).

Obviously this could change, but he was never a trans person who wanted to be open about the fact that he was trans. He just wants to “pass” and, you know, be a man and that’s the end of the story.

Maxine felt that Eddie’s confidence, self-esteem, and engagement in activities within the family home had profoundly improved as a result of his transition. However, Eddie reportedly continued to face some emotional difficulties associated with the ongoing persecution of gay and trans people in the home country of one of his and Maxine’s parents.

### ***General family responses to Eddie’s trans identity and transition***

Maxine described her parents as supportive and accepting of Eddie’s trans identity and transition. Overall, she described her parents as very much involved in his transition process and viewed herself as moderately involved.

[E]ven though, initially, they didn’t understand that for Eddie that meant being trans, as soon as that revelation occurred, it was like, *okay, cool, what are the next steps?* And so, yeah, my parents have been great.

I guess the one interesting thing about our story is, my immediate family and the people who live in our home and the people that we’re friends with have been *great* about Eddie.

Maxine felt that Eddie’s transition in the family context was “very quick” with respect to Eddie’s gender presentation, name, pronouns, and medical interventions. Maxine and her family had reportedly participated in counselling services for support with Eddie’s gender transition, which Maxine felt to be helpful. She also described a deliberate personal effort to expand her knowledge of transgender identities and gender diversity.

## Chapter 4. Thematic Findings and Discussions

This chapter includes descriptions of the findings from participant interviews, organized thematically. The selected themes represent those which were consistent with statements made by the majority of participants as well as those themes which I otherwise deemed most salient. Of note, a directional theme expressed among certain participants did *not* necessarily indicate that the remaining participants' statements would support that theme's antithesis. Using the first subtheme below as an example, while five of the 11 participants (46%) viewed their sibling's transition as an important part of their personal life story, none of the remaining participants explicitly described their sibling's transition as *unimportant* to their life story. In other words, the absence of a theme in a given interview may simply reflect its relatively less salience for a participant, rather than a theme's total absence or irrelevance for that participant.

### 4.1. Varied and wide-ranging emotional responses to a sibling's transgender or nonbinary identity disclosure and transition

Participants described a variety of responses to learning of a sibling's transgender or nonbinary identity. Five participants (46%) described the initial experience of surprise or a sense of "suddenness" in response to this information. Six participants (55%) described confusion in response to learning of their sibling's trans or nonbinary identity. Notably, three participants (27%) shared the experience of relief in response to their sibling's gender identity disclosure. In contrast to initial feelings of relief, more than half the participants (six; 55%) described periods in which they worried for the wellbeing of their trans sibling. Similarly, six participants (55%) described feelings of sadness and sympathy toward their sibling's emotional difficulties related to their transitions. For some participants, feelings of sadness were accompanied by related thoughts regarding their own perceived helplessness and isolation given their sibling's difficulties. Above all, the large majority of participants (nine; 82%) conveyed feelings of pride, happiness, and admiration toward their sibling's trans identity. Several participants stated that these positive emotional experiences represented their most dominant emotional response to their sibling's transition, overall. These aforementioned emotional responses to a sibling's transition, as described by study participants, are described in

greater detail below. Due to the complex and seemingly contradictory nature of these subthemes, a collective discussion of the findings in this section is provided in section 4.1.7.

#### **4.1.1. Initial sense of suddenness or surprise**

Nearly half of the participants (five of 11; 46%) described a common sense of suddenness regarding their siblings' gender identity disclosures. Several participants described an impression of suddenness regarding their awareness or learning of their sibling's trans or nonbinary gender identity. Maxine described "shock" but denied feeling surprised by her sibling's coming out as male. Oppositely, Andre related to the experience of "surprise," lasting for only "a couple of days," which he distinguished from a sense of "shock."

I don't know if I would call it exactly shock, because it wasn't really. It was a surprise, but... shock to me is... a word to use when you hear bad news and you get scared or something, which I wasn't. It was just something I didn't really expect to hear... the caught-off-guard feeling, maybe.

Some participants described the impending series of changes involving their sibling's gender transition, which brought on a sense of unknowingness, uncertainty, and unpreparedness for what was to come. These participants referred to having braced themselves for very important changes in their siblings' lives, accompanied by a sense of responsibility, if not pressure, to quickly process and adapt to this change.

It's just a major thing... this huge thing that we're gonna have to go through... I think it's just a sense of heading into something really huge and not knowing what that will look like. It's like someone telling you they have a major diagnosis... And you're just like, you can't even take it in. But definitely, I was very conscious of being like, *no this is our relationship, and our relationship won't be affected.* ... I think I did go through kind of an experience of sort of shock, just in terms of, like, *woah! This is a really huge thing that's happening!* (Quinn)

... [W]hen they [Phoebe's nonbinary sibling] first said that [disclosed their nonbinary identity] to me, I think they timed it very cleverly. I think they specifically did it when I was out the door on my way to a summer camp so that I didn't really have time to question them about it or have it turn into a big thing. And I was gonna be out of contact for 10 days, so they didn't really have to deal with it. They could just tell me and be done with it. Honestly, at the time, I was like, *okay*, but I

was also thinking about a lot of other things, so I couldn't really fully take the time to process it. (Phoebe)

I would have liked it to have not been so sudden... just so I was a bit more prepared... I definitely wasn't surprised. If anything, the shock was like, *oh, so we're doing this now?* But, for so long, Eddie had been showing that he wanted to be a boy... I was shocked because it was happening so fast. And part of me was still unsure. I didn't know that much about it yet, so when it first started happening, I was like, *should we slow down, maybe?* ... [F]or them [Maxine's family], it was a process. And then for me, it seemed more like, *now he's trans.* ... I guess I just remember it all being very sudden. (Maxine)

Meanwhile, nearly half of the participants (five; 46%) denied the experience of any such feelings of shock, surprise, or suddenness, but instead described an immediate, coolheaded acceptance of their sibling as trans.

I kind of looked at him and said, "Okay, if that's who you are then that's who you are. And I will still love you for that, obviously. You're my sibling." ... It wasn't that huge of a shock. He seemed really happy having figured it out, so obviously we were all really happy for him. (Dani)

#### **4.1.2. Confusion**

Six participants (55%) described confusion in response to learning of their sibling's trans identity and/or a lack of understanding about what it meant for their sibling to identify as trans or decide to undergo a gender transition. Several of these participants described increased learning and understanding as their siblings' transitions progressed, accompanied by increased acceptance and support.

Leanne described her initial lack of understanding of the term "transgender." She experienced confusion in response to overhearing conversations between her parents regarding her brother's trans identity.

... I didn't even know what the word "transgender" meant. I think I thought it meant something like "lesbian" at the time... I would always hear my mom and dad talking about it because everyone knew something was "off." And for a while I thought he had Down syndrome. I don't know why... I'm not sure if it was because I heard my parents talking about doctors or seeing someone, and I was just putting two and two together because that's all I knew...

Phoebe attributed her sense of confusion to the sequential nature in which her trans-feminine nonbinary sibling came out to her, beginning with her sibling's disclosure of their desire to dress in a fashion that did not conform to their assigned male gender.

... [T]hey were definitely hiding it a lot from my parents, which I guess gave me a clue to think that it might be something more than just wanting to wear dresses... And it became this really big secret. And I was like, well, if it's just about gender presentation and not about gender identity, I don't really see why it would be this big of a secret to keep from my parents.

Maxine's understanding of her brother as transgender was complicated by his concurrent mental health issues and diagnosis of Asperger's syndrome, which preceded his gender identity disclosure.

... [W]hen all of the school things were happening and when he was really depressed because of everything that is going on in school, for me, I had a hard time distinguishing what was because of his identity crisis and what was because of the Asperger's.

With respect to her sister's social transition process, Mia described intermittent periods of confusion and subsequent insight, as a result of her family navigating the transition relatively independently, without any concrete informed or "expert" guidance.

[T]here isn't really a book that says, "Alright, this is how your family should transition. This is what needs... These are the..." We just kind of felt like we were on our own with respect to that.

Finally, Andre indicated that he fully accepted his brother as transgender but admitted that he continued to lack understanding of his brother's trans identity and described his learning process as ongoing.

...I don't understand it. I haven't been through it, so it's kind of a grey area type of thing for me... It's not a clear subject. There's still a lot that I have to learn and have to understand before I fully understand what the process is like.

### **4.1.3. Relief**

Notably, three participants (27%) described feelings of relief due to having clearer understandings of their siblings' challenges relating to their being trans, their progress in consolidating their gender identities, and the prospective positive outcomes of their transitions.

I responded with acceptance. Just being like... I don't want to say it's not a big deal, but I was basically like, *okay. At least now I know what's been upsetting you.* 'Cause I had known there was something going on. (Quinn)

I was relieved when she finally decided that [she was transgender]. 'Cause I was like, *oh, okay, good.* Because I knew that's kind of who she was, and I was glad that she was making that decision for herself kind of earlier in her life. I know that she's still very young, but I thought that was good for her, rather than waiting, and then puberty starting, and all that happening. (Mia)

#### **4.1.4. Worry and concern for a sibling's wellbeing**

Six participants (55%) described feeling worried about the current or future wellbeing of their trans siblings, due to their gender minority identities. For example, Quinn described some periods in which she felt concerned for her transgender brother, particularly regarding the life challenges she expected him to face.

... I did feel a significant amount of worry at certain points. Just like, *oh my god. What are you gonna go through? This is gonna be so hard.* ... Especially 'cause, from my work, I know that people can go through a really hard time and then reach a turning point and they're okay... I would love it if he was in a happy relationship. I would love that, whoever it was, I don't care. So, I think that would be really great if he was in a relationship that made him happy, which I totally see as a definite possibility...

Paralleling this empathic concern, within the first one to two month's following Maxine's trans brother's identity disclosure, she admitted to feeling worried about whether her brother truly wanted to come out as gender-neutral and subsequently as trans-male, or if he was acquiescing with his care team in this decision.

... [F]or me, it went so quickly, it was hard for me to tell if that was really what he wanted or if they were taking steps [*regarding gender-neutral pronouns*] that he was just, like, "Sure, okay," and was too shy to express that...

#### **4.1.5. Sadness, sympathy, and related experiences of helplessness and isolation**

Six participants (55%) described feelings of sadness relating to their siblings' transitions. For example, although Quinn did not identify with an overall sense of loss regarding the transition of her sibling from "sister" to "brother," she described feeling sad

upon the recognition of this major change in her trans brother's life, within the context of shifting dynamics across her sibling triad.

[I] just had this sadness about things changing. 'Cause I did identify as the middle sibling of three girls. And yeah, it's a big change. I think that for me, there was something difficult about that..."

Quinn also described sadness associated with her losing her brother Shiloh's feminine voice during the period in which it was changing with testosterone treatment.

Nonetheless, she described the diminishment of her sadness with increased understanding and empathy regarding Shiloh's own transition experience.

... When I met up with him [Shiloh] once and his voice had changed, I remember feeling sad. I wish I had recorded his voice as a female voice... I don't feel sadness now though. I feel like I've really witnessed how hard this been for him, and so I don't feel criticism or, you know. I mean that in a sincere way... But I do remember feeling surprised and sad about the voice. I mean, it's a voice you've heard forever and then it's different. You're like, *what the hell?*

Participants also frequently described feeling sad *for* their siblings as a result of the adversities and distress the siblings endured at various points during their transition. Feeling sad *for* one's sibling rather than oneself represents a form of other-oriented—or sympathetic—sadness. For example, Phoebe described sadness related to her sibling Peyton's experiences of incongruence between their gender identity and gender presentation.

I wish that things were better than they were. I wish that Peyton could "pass" the way that they want to. I wish they could be more confident in how they present. I wish that the last image people didn't have of them of any school [photo] is as a male. I wish a bunch of things were different... [E]very time I have to have that interaction [about Peyton's gender labels and pronouns] is just kind of a reminder that Peyton isn't quite where they want to be yet in terms of their transition. And I know that that's really difficult.

Other participants described feeling sad for their siblings due to the prejudices and discrimination that had been, or would be expectantly, imposed upon the sibling.

So anytime people have been discriminating against her, I think it's hard for my family, especially 'cause she's a kid, right? It's pretty hard to see adults beating down on a kid just 'cause she's trying to be herself. So, I feel like everyone in my family just kind of feels that when she gets upset. (Mia)

...[T]he 'coming out' and stuff, and people just learning about their new identities... It made me nervous for him that people weren't gonna accept him. And I just—When people say stuff like, "You're so gay," and stuff, I argue with them and I say, "You shouldn't say things like that." It really hurts me to hear people say stuff like that. Just hearing people do it on purpose—It really upset me. (Dani)

Dani emphasized that despite disclosing her sadness for her brother, she in no way wanted to diminish the strength and resilience she believed her brother and other transgender individuals to possess.

Both Maxine and Quinn described feeling sympathetic toward their transgender brothers and a convergent sense of helplessness.

... I felt really, really down all the time, because I felt like I wasn't doing my job. Even though, that's stupid, because I was the child—I wasn't supposed to be controlling anything—I see that now. But at the time, that was really hard for me. (Maxine)

I definitely did have crisis periods... I remember meeting up with Shiloh, and we somehow went for a walk... And Shiloh sat down on some steps, and was just sitting there, crying and crying and crying. And I remember just feeling completely helpless, just like, *there's nothing I can do*. And I remember just being so upset about that. 'Cause it's your sibling. You want to help or make it better... You want them to feel okay, but there's nothing you can do to make them feel okay if they're like, "I'm in the wrong fucking body!" So, I remember having experiences of just being like, what the fuck. (Quinn)

Relating to the experience of helplessness, two participants described a sense of isolation associated with their roles in supporting their respective trans siblings, as expressed by Maxine:

It was hard to watch Eddie go through this transition and not having someone I could talk to about it who wasn't my parents I think was hard... I felt like I didn't have anyone I could talk to.

When we were going through the transition, like in the early stages, it really did feel like we were the only family in the city that was experiencing that.

Maxine's brother, Eddie, reportedly experienced emotional difficulties and suicidality as a result of bully victimization secondary to his gender nonconformity and subsequent transition. Maxine stated that she privately worried for Eddie, which further contributed to her sense of isolation associated with Eddie's trans identity.

[A]t that point [in which Eddie was in a psychiatric unit], I didn't really know what was going on. I knew bad stuff was happening at school, but I guess I didn't really understand the extent of how hard it was for Eddie. And so, to hear that my little brother is suicidal, it was really scary... All through high school I didn't really have very close friends. I've actually only told like two people about Eddie in-depth, and the fact that he's trans... to this date. So that's just like a personal thing. I'm very private and kind of have trust issues. So, to go through that kind of alone, in a sense, was hard. Because everyone in my family, it was also very hard for them. So, they weren't necessarily the best support for me.

Several participants described the tension between their empathic sadness and empathic joy regarding their siblings' transition experience, as described below..

#### **4.1.6. Happiness, pride, and admiration**

Nine participants (82%) described feelings of happiness, pride, and/or admiration in response to their siblings' trans identity disclosures and subsequent transitions. Several participants particularly described feeling empathic happiness associated with their impressions that their siblings gained comfort and confidence due to undergoing gender-affirming hormone treatment.

I was super happy for Shiloh when he started testosterone, both times... There's definitely been good stuff. And I know that he's sent me happy messages about certain things. He has posted on Facebook about starting testosterone again, being happy about that, and people being really positive and encouraging. And yeah, definitely there's been celebration too. Yeah. We focused a lot on the struggles, but there's also been positive stuff. (Quinn)

To be honest, it makes me really happy... I was like, "Wow! You have so much leg hair!" And he smiled! And he was like, "Yeah, isn't it awesome?" And just seeing how happy it makes him, it makes me so happy. (Maxine)

I liked seeing my brother be more confident and happy with him[self] as Jacob. (Iris)

Across study interviews and member checks, several participants highlighted the overarching impression that their emotional experience of their sibling's transition was more positive than negative overall. For example, Dani described happiness as the central emotional experience in response to her brother Keith's gender transition, at times complicated by conflicting feelings of sadness; a combination of feelings which she described as "happy-sad." During our member check she clarified, "The sadness is due

to the loss of my sister, but the happiness overpowers that by a lot.” She further described wanting, and thus deliberately *choosing*, to experience happiness over sadness in response to Keith’s transition. Dani’s happiness was rooted in empathic joy in response to witnessing the joy experienced by her trans brother resulting from his transition.

In addition, several participants described feelings of pride and admiration for their siblings having the courage to transition and live as their affirmed genders.

I guess just really the fact of being brave enough to come out with the transition and everything. And going through with it, like the legal name change, and the hormone cycle thing. (Andre)

Mia similarly shared that she and her immediate family “think[s] it’s great that [my sister] has the courage to be who she is, ‘cause that’s pretty important.”

#### **4.1.7. General discussion of theme**

One of my goals in the current study was to characterize the ways in which siblings, compared to their parents, respond emotionally to their family member as trans. As discussed in the Introduction (see section 1.10), previous qualitative research has found that a parent’s emotional responses to a child’s transition may include worry (e.g., Capous-Desyllan & Barron, 2017; Gregor, 2013), shock, disbelief, fear/anxiety, betrayal and denial (e.g., Key, 2014; Lesser, 1999; Menvielle, 2012), especially at the outset of learning about their child’s trans identity. Findings from the current study suggest that cisgender siblings experience similar fundamental emotional reactions, namely those of shock or suddenness and fear or worry (described in sections 4.1.1 and 4.1.4 below). However, none of the participants in the current study endorsed experiences of betrayal or denial, thus diverging from the previously reported parental experiences (Key, 2014; Lesser, 1999).

The experience of worrying for a sibling’s wellbeing has been documented across individuals with siblings facing diverse emotional and developmental challenges. For example, in a qualitative study by Callio and Gustafsson (2016), adolescents with sisters who had eating disorders commonly reported feelings of worry toward their sisters. Further, experiences associated with the feeling of relief have been discussed in previous studies exploring others’ responses to one’s trans identity disclosure. For

example, in Whitley's (2013) qualitative study, the majority of friends of trans individuals endorsed a sense of "closure" in response to their friend coming out. Lastly, siblings in the current study described experiences of acceptance of their trans sibling, as well as gratitude for the positive changes in their sibling's life. Key (2014) described overlapping responses from parents of trans children, once a parent has entered the stage of acceptance, willingness, celebration, and/or gratitude toward their trans child. According to Key, during this final stage achieved by parents of a trans child, a parent will recognize their child as brave and authentic. Participants in the current study conveyed a similar sense of admiration toward their trans sibling, experienced in response to various milestones over the course of a sibling's transition (e.g., one's gender identity disclosure, starting testosterone, etc.).

Some of the experiences described by participants in the current study may seem contradictory. For instance, some of the current participants who described periods of shock or the sense of "suddenness" nonetheless asserted that they had always been accepting of their siblings as transgender. Similar apparent contradictions have been identified in previous research. For example, in Huang et al.'s (2016) investigation of Chinese American siblings of gay and lesbian individuals, some participants described acceptance toward their gay or lesbian siblings, but nonetheless experienced some degree of negative emotions including "denial, worry, shock, and hurt" (Huang et al., 2016, p. 152). Findings from both studies reveal the often complex and dynamic nature of one's reactions to a sibling's sexual orientation or gender identity disclosure.

An interviewee's seemingly contradictory emotional reactions may best be understood through the previously discussed "multiplicity of / positions" (Hermans et al., 1992, p. 30), whereby multiple conflicting emotional experiences may co-exist within a single individual. For example, those siblings who highly value gender inclusivity may expect themselves to act in accordance with this principle in response to a sibling's trans identity disclosure and/or transition. Incongruence between one's personal values and the challenging aspects of their emotional experience may lead to the emergence of a "multiplicity" of narratives representing seemingly conflicting reactions to their sibling's trans identity and/or transition. Some participants expressed awareness of their own multiple emotional reactions to their sibling. Some of these participants conveyed that

challenging emotional reactions did not discount their positive attitudes toward a sibling's trans identity.

Conversely, accepting one's sibling as trans does not necessarily inoculate one from experiencing unpleasant or challenging emotional reactions to a sibling's gender identity disclosure or transition process. While previous authors have highlighted the acceptance of a trans family member as a "process" (e.g., Key, 2014; Lesser, 1999; Menvielle, 2012), it seems that for some siblings, acceptance does not necessarily represent the endpoint of one's personal emotional journey. Rather, acceptance of one's sibling as trans seems to represent one's prevailing value-driven orientation toward their sibling's trans identity, despite one's complex emotional experiences.

Many of the current participants' emotional experiences of both negative and positive valence were grounded in empathy. Compassion refers to the caring for another person and the shared experience of their suffering (Leahy, 2005; Thwaites & Bennett-Levy, 2007). Sympathy refers to the recognition of, and the desire or attempt to alleviate, another person's suffering (Gilbert, 2005; Thwaites & Bennett-Levy, 2007). Participants described other-oriented experiences of both sadness and joy toward their sibling as trans. However, for some participants, empathic sadness resulted in *self*-oriented feelings relating to hopelessness, loneliness, isolation, or helplessness. Hopelessness appeared to arise from a combination of the recognition of a trans sibling's unmet emotional needs, the participant's desire and motivation to help their sibling, and the participant's lack of hope that they could alleviate their trans sibling's pain. Overall, empathy played an important role in the emotional experiences of study participants, whose emotional responses often depended on their perceptions of a sibling's wellbeing and struggles.

Given the infrequency of the experience of having a trans family member and the lack of resources for trans folk and their family members, it is not surprising that feelings of loneliness and isolation were described in addition to feelings of sadness, empathic concern, and helplessness. Experiences of isolation and loneliness were described both in terms of: (a) a participant's awareness of their trans sibling's isolation, and (b) their sense that they, the cis siblings, and their family as a unit had to navigate their family member's transition and best support that family member with little, if any, external social or community support.

Fortunately, negative aspects of participants' reactions to their sibling's transition were often described as eclipsed by their more dominant feelings of happiness, pride, and admiration for their siblings. Moreover, participants described the confidence, courage, and self-knowledge required to come out as transgender and undergo a transition at the risk of social stigma and public discrimination. Several participants emphasized these attributes especially given their young ages of their trans siblings at the time of their gender identity disclosures. Further, I would hypothesize that one's admiration toward their trans sibling may invigorate one's own desire to gain a broader understanding of gender diversity. In keeping with this hypothesis, participants in the current study reported increased knowledge of gender diversity through the experience of having a trans sibling, as discussed in section 4.2.4 below.

Overall, findings from the current study suggest that cis siblings of trans individuals who come from generally trans-affirmative families tend to characterize their emotional experiences of having trans sibling as more positive than negative. Cis siblings of trans folk may also experience a sibling's transition as less distressing than a parent would experience a child's transition.

## **4.2. Positive personal attitudes toward a sibling's trans identity and transition**

The section above refers to participants' emotional reactions to a sibling's trans identity and transition. In addition to their emotional experiences, participants described conceptually-driven and interpretative impressions of their sibling as trans, framed within the context of the participant's own life experiences. In other words, participants revealed their *cognitive appraisals* associated with having a trans sibling, which were mostly positive, as summarized below.

Five of the 11 participants (46%) shared that they regarded the experience of a sibling's transition to be an important part of the participant's personal life story. Nine participants (82%) described acceptance toward their sibling as trans and denied any longstanding negative outcomes of their sibling's transition. Nine participants shared that they adjusted relatively easily to their sibling's chosen names, pronouns, and/or new sibling titles (as "brother," "sister," or gender-neutral "sibling"). Similarly, nine participants denied any significant sense of loss resulting from the changes in their sibling.

Additionally, nine participants shared that they acquired a broader awareness and understanding of gender diversity, sometimes reconceptualizing gender itself, as a result of their sibling's transition. Eight participants (73%) recognized their own strength, growth, and resilience over the course of their sibling's transition process.

#### **4.2.1. Sibling's transition as important part of personal life story**

Five of the 11 participants (46%) shared that their siblings' gender transitions represented significant components of their personal life stories. For example, Mia described her sister Parker's gender transition as a formative experience for both her and Parker. However, Mia did note that her and Parker's complex identities are not defined by her trans identity alone.

It doesn't define me and it doesn't define Parker, but I think just the experiences that come with that and all the things we've had to do. And then the discrimination she's faced and all that has shaped me. It's also the positive things, like all the things that have gone right, then motivating me to do things...

Of note, all participants whose statements corresponded with this subtheme described close relationships with their trans siblings.

#### ***Discussion of subtheme***

The fact that this subtheme was represented by nearly half of the study participants suggests that the experience of a sibling's transition is not only meaningful for knowledge's sake but is also often regarded as a meaningful life event by the *experiencers*, the siblings of trans folk. A combination of factors likely bolster the significance of a sibling's transition within the broader scope of a participant's life: an individual's high regard for their relationship with the sibling who has embarked on the transition; the sheer psychosocial significance of a gender transition within the sibling relationship and the larger family unit; and, the relatively rare occurrence of this experience among the general population.

The absence of this theme in the interviews of the remaining participants suggests that these participants may have experienced less close relationships with their trans sibling, even prior to their transition. Moreover, several of the participants who did not describe close dyadic sibling relationships described themselves as emotionally

distanced from a sibling's transition process, in effort to exercise personal autonomy regarding life choices as well as independence.

In sum, the experience of a sibling's transition sometimes becomes integrated into one's self-perception, impression of one's family, and/or one's worldview, most notably among siblings with longstanding close and positive relationships with their trans sibling. In contrast, significant meaning is not always ascribed to this experience. Some siblings of trans individuals may desire to distance themselves from a trans sibling's transition or individuate themselves from their trans sibling. These responses may help an individual to deflect any perceived barriers to self-development associated with a sibling's trans identity or transition. Overall, the degree and type of meaning ascribed to the experience of having a trans sibling appears to be influenced by one's personal values and life goals.

#### **4.2.2. Minimal and inconsequential adjustment to a sibling as transgender**

##### ***Unqualified acceptance of one's sibling as transgender***

Irrespective of whether a participant regarded the experience of a sibling's transition as a salient life experience overall, the large majority (nine; 82%) shared that accepting their siblings as trans required minimal effort and was absent of adverse consequences to themselves or their family members. For example, both Vanessa and Celeste describe their ready acceptance of their sibling's trans identities and the absence of any interference in their daily lives. .

I didn't really see it as a big deal, so I wasn't thinking about it all the time; I was just like, I mean, it's Blake. Blake's Blake... It just kind of went on like usual. (Vanessa)

... [My sister] just said, "By the way, I'm transgender." And then we just carried on with our lives... The entire "coming out" was sort of in itself nonchalant. (Celeste)

Andre shared this perspective, adding that others seemed to expect his brother's transition to have made a more dramatic impact on him.

It's never really been a big deal for me, and I never really gave it much thought, but I would think that for most people it would be kind of a big change and a big deal. But for me, it's kind of nothing much.

Participants often related their ease of adjustment to their pre-existing sense of closeness within their families, their prior recognition and acceptance of their sibling as gender-nonconforming prior to coming out (as described by Mia, below), as well as their and their family's pre-existing open-minded and accepting attitudes toward gender diversity (as described by Celeste, below).

...[I]t didn't really feel like a big change. It wasn't like Parker was pretending to be a boy her entire life... So it wasn't, all of a sudden, "I'm actually a girl." And we weren't like, "Oh my gosh," It's just, "Oh yeah, okay. That was kind of expected" ... I think that one of the most important things is that it wasn't like other transitions I've heard about, since Parker was already acting like a girl for pretty much all of her life. She already had girl toys, girl clothes... It wasn't a super big change other than the [gender] labels... [I]t wasn't like it was turning our whole world upside down; it was kind of making it right. (Mia)

... There was a fluidity to gender, especially because it wasn't particularly enforced in my family. Because it wasn't drilled into my mind that *Nico is a boy! And this is how boys are. And Nico looks like that, so Nico is a boy.* It was never like that. So, the transition was almost effortless. (Celeste)

### ***Adjustment to chosen names, pronouns, and corresponding sibling labels***

Most participants described their adjustments to their siblings' chosen names, pronouns, modified relational identities (i.e., as a "sister," "brother," or "sibling" in singular form) as relatively easy. Participants often contrasted their own experiences with the difficulties which they perceived their parents and/or extended family members to have experienced. Some participants described an initial sense of novelty, surprise, and/or awkwardness associated with these changes, before quickly habituating. Lukas and Dani both described straightforward adjustments to their trans brothers' new names and pronouns, characterized by the "breaking" of old habits and the implementation of new ones.

It was as simple as I just had to remember to do it. It was just a matter of changing a habit that I haven't entirely broken yet. It's just a matter of breaking the habit. (Lukas)

So as soon as he said, "I'm changing my name to Keith," I changed his name in my phone, so that when I would get texts or calls, it said *Keith* instead of his former name. So that way I would just get into the habit of calling him Keith. For me, it didn't take very long for me to start calling him "he" and "him"... Same with the name. I think I messed it up like twice... so it was pretty quick. (Dani)

Leanne experienced Joe's name change as the most profound aspect of Joe's transition process up until the interview.

That was a very big moment for sure... It's just that changing your name is just a little bit more a bigger deal than the little things like clothes or hair. I just thought, oh, you can change your clothes and you can change your hair, but the name is just a little more "out there," I guess.

Nevertheless, she described this adjustment as lessened by the fact that her immediate family was making the name and pronoun changes altogether.

... [Y]ou get used to it so fast when everyone else in your family's doing it.

### ***Adjustment to physical changes***

Several participants described an ease of adjustment to their siblings' physical transitions following the commencement of hormone treatment. Andre described an initial period of adjustment to Ryan's deepened voice, to which he had then grown accustomed: "At first it was just kind of weird 'cause it's different, but I'm pretty used to it by now..."

Three participants' siblings were not yet in the age range in which gender-affirming medical procedures, aside from hormone suppressants, are typically initiated (usually at the age of 11 or 12). This theme thus does not apply to those participants with prepubescent siblings and others who had not engaged in gender-affirming hormonal or surgical interventions.

### ***Discussion of subtheme***

Previous research suggests that gender does play an important role in family relations. Whitley's (2013) qualitative study indicated that cisgender parents and siblings experienced changes in the relational identity of their trans family member (i.e., having a "son" versus a "daughter" or a "brother" versus a "sister") as a significant aspect of their processing of the transition. In the current study, it may be surmised that strong family communication and close relations help to mitigate the risk of negative experiences associated with a sibling's transition. As discussed previously (see section 1.9), research suggests that socially-supported transitioning is associated with reduced negative outcomes for the trans person, including less mood symptomology (Simons et al., 2013), higher self-esteem (Travers, et al., 2012), and higher ratings of life satisfactions (Simons

et al., 2013; Travers et al., 2012). Perhaps by witnessing their sibling's transition, cisgender siblings may appreciate the weight of the positive outcomes of the transition on their sibling in comparison to likely less significant potential setbacks. As described above (see section 4.1.6), most participants in the current study conveyed the emotional experience of empathic joy for their sibling having benefited emotionally by transitioning. Considering that the best interests of one's trans sibling was so central to the emotional experiences of the cisgender participants, it is not surprising that most described their ready acceptance of their sibling as transgender.

The participants who described minimal and inconsequential adjustments to their sibling as trans did nonetheless share minor difficulties and negative emotional reactions to the transition. However, most negative aspects of their experiences did not relate directly to difficulties accepting their siblings as trans. Instead, negative experiences related to complications secondary to the transition process, including altered family dynamics and challenges within a participant's broader community. As discussed above (see section 4.1.7), several participants highlighted that the negative aspects of their experiences were relatively minor in comparison to the positive outcomes of the transition for their sibling, and thus for themselves. Moreover, participants tended to approach a sibling's transition with optimism, a constituent of resilience which was identified as a salient subtheme from this study (see section 4.2.5 below).

### **4.2.3. No sense of loss, but something positive gained**

Nine of 11 participants (82%) denied experiencing a significant sense of loss in response to their sibling's gender identity disclosures and changes in gender presentations. In fact, several participants viewed the transition experience as a positive "gain" for their sibling due to resultant improvements in their quality of life. By extension, participants tended to view the transition process as a positive "gain" for themselves and for their families.

The brothers of two participants were very young when they transitioned (each between six and 12 years old). Neither cisgender sibling experienced a sense of loss, and both described an absence of any tangible concept of having a "sister" prior to their sibling's transition. As Leanne described: "I don't feel like 'loss' would really fit for me... I'm not really sure what I lost because I lost it..."

Three more participants similarly shared that they did not need to reconceptualize their trans siblings' genders following this gender disclosures or transitions, as each participant perceived their sibling as gender-nonconforming prior to their transition.

So, when he came out as trans it was a loss of a sister, but I don't think it was the same as if someone had a sister with, like, long hair, and they curled their hair all the time and wore full-on make-up, and then came out looking like that, and said, "I'm a male." I think that would be much more drastic. All the things he did in his life... they all just sort of built up to [his transition]. So I lost a sister, technically; but for a long, long time, my sister was a tomboy, so it wasn't like a huge change, which is also probably why it didn't affect me that much when he came out. (Dani)

Celeste stated that she was not attached to the notion of her twin sibling as her "brother."

... [I]t also didn't feel like I was losing a brother because it was never really cemented into my mind that Nico had to be a 'brother.' I mean, it never crossed my mind that she would be anything else, but I didn't feel like it was the only thing she could be...

Quinn shared that she had invested in her brother Shiloh's transition process above and beyond any imagined future of what life would be like if he was still her "sister."

No, I never experienced that loss... I didn't have some narrative of Shiloh's wedding and babies... I think because I was also so involved in the process, I think that part of me— Like, I don't think I had time or energy to think about that stuff.

Maxine described her initial fear that Eddie would become less "loving" and "family-oriented" after coming out as male. She described a sense of relief when realizing that her sibling maintained these positive attributes following his transition. Maxine thus denied any sense of loss associated with the quality of their sibling relationship.

...I was worried that if Eddie was my brother we wouldn't be as close, and he wouldn't talk to me as much, because I'd heard stories from other people about how [in] brother-sister relationships, they don't get along at all, and the brothers are awful and stuff like that. And I really wanted to continue being an older sibling to Eddie and caring for him like I used to. And I actually feel really lucky that Eddie hasn't really lost his, kind of, his loving side and his family-oriented side... [H]e's got a lot of feelings. He expresses them, not always readily expresses them, but he's not hyper-masculine in that way. So, we can still connect through that, which I feel really lucky for.

A few participants described moral judgments on family members' experiences of loss regarding another family member's transition.

I mean, it's a little harsh of me, but my opinion is kind of rolling of eyes when [others identify with a sense of loss regarding a family member's transition]. Because I just think it's so unnecessary. Like, it's the same person. It's just a switch of label. And if I were to put myself in Blake's shoes, that would be kind of harsh to hear that. It's like, *no, you didn't lose anyone. I'm the same person. I've always been the same person.* They've been growing up as becoming the same person... And I just kind of feel like it's an unnecessary excuse to feel sad. It should actually be seen as a positive thing; it's someone accepting their own identity and being open and happy about it. (Vanessa)

Celeste described her experience of the concrete loss of someone in her life who had died by suicide. In light of her experience, Celeste viewed Nico's transition as life-enhancing rather than life-threatening. She suggested that it would in fact be erroneous to experience her twin sibling's transition as the loss of Nico as a person.

...[I]t's not as if I lost anything on Nico as a person. If anything, Nico came more into herself as a person, and so it was more of a gain than a loss... I think if she had kept it to herself, it might have led to resentment. It could have made her more suicidal, and so then I could have *really* lost something. Like, she could have lost her life. And because I've lost someone [*to suicide*] ... I didn't want to go through that again. I didn't want to lose somebody.

Celeste advocated for other family members of trans individuals to attempt to understand and accept the trans person's personal experience of their gender transition, rather than misappraising a family member's transition as a "loss."

It's important that they know it's not a loss. Like, you're not losing anything. And if it strengthens your bond with either your sibling or your child, then you're not losing anything. And it's important to know that your perspective is not the only perspective. They're going through hard things. And just 'cause you never had to go through that doesn't invalidate them.

### ***Discussion of subtheme***

In previous literature on the family transition process (e.g., Brill & Pepper, 2008; Coolhart, 2012; Key, 2014; Pearlman, 2012), authors have commonly indicated that parents of TGN individuals experience a sense of loss or grief in response to their child's transition. It has been reported that parents experience the loss of a relationship with the "son" or "daughter" whom parents felt they had prior to their child's transition. Similarly,

Kuvalanka et al. (2014) indicate that mothers of trans girls believed their cisgender children to have experienced a sense of losing a brother. To my best knowledge, this finding by Kuvalanka et al. (2014) is the only empirical description of loss as experienced by the sibling of a trans person rather than their parent. Participants of the current study affirmed that they did not relate to the experience of “losing” a sister or brother due to their transition. These current findings lie in stark contrast with the previously reported sense of loss that parents, and perhaps siblings, were believed to have experienced in response to a family member’s gender transition.

Norwood (2012) found that parents tend to experience confusion as to whether their child is the same or a different person following a transgender identity disclosure. This perceived ambiguity regarding the identity of one’s child may contribute to a parent’s sense of loss in response to their child’s transition. The concept of *ambiguous loss* refers to experiences of the loss of a loved one whose presence or absence is unclear due to a vague change in their status (Boss, 2004). This concept has been applied to the phenomena such as the development of dementia in a loved one or a loved one’s missing person status. Wahlig (2015) suggests that ambiguous loss is also experienced by parents whose child undergoes a gender transition. Moreover, the parents are asked to part from their previous understanding of their child’s gender identity. The parents are further asked to surrender any attachment to their child’s physical presence in this perceived gender identity (i.e., corresponding to their sex assigned at birth). In this sense, a parent may not only experience the loss of their “daughter” or “son,” but in some vague way, the loss of their *child*. Wahlig (2015) additionally suggests that parents may grieve the loss of a child’s or family’s past, potentially confronting “the idea that their young child’s gendered experiences may not have been authentic” (p. 313).

The discrepancy between parents’ sense of loss described in previous literature and the absence of any such loss for most participants of the current study points to likely differences between the meaning ascribed to a family member’s transition by a parent versus a sibling. Unlike siblings, parents’ views of their children may be influenced by gendered hopes and expectations of their futures (Norwood, 2012, 2013), such as the dreams of walking their child, as a bride or groom, down the aisle (e.g., Pearlman, 2012). Theorists have long postulated that parents’ desire for their children to fulfill the parents’ life aspirations which they themselves had not achieved. A unique

study of 73 parents in the Netherlands examined this phenomenon (Brummelman, Thomaes, Slagt, Overbeek, Orobio de Castro, & Bushman, 2013). A Likert scale measured the degree to which a parent desired for their child to fulfill the parent's unfulfilled ambitions, ranging from 1 ("disagree strongly") to 7 ("agree strongly"). Parents' average response rating was 3.18 ( $SD = 1.66$ ). The desire for a parent's child to fulfill the parent's unfulfilled ambitions was related to the degree to which the parent viewed their child as part of themselves. Perhaps the tendency to transfer or project one's dreams and ambitions onto one's children may be influenced by the degree to which a parent adheres to gender-based expectations of their children.

Consistent with this hypothesis, it is reasonable to assume that parents are generally more likely to develop and adhere to gender-based aspirations for their children than siblings are for one another. In contrast with the hierarchical relationship structure between parents and their children, siblings tend to grow up alongside one another through their developmental trajectory. In this sense, the nature of the sibling relationship is perhaps comparable to the analogy of "fellow traveler[s]" used by psychotherapist Irvin Yalom (2002) to describe the patient-therapist relationship in their shared therapeutic processes. Moreover, the inherent horizontal nature of the sibling dyad helps to explain why, for most participants in the current study, no expectation of a sibling's future was described as "lost" due to their sibling's gender transition.

As mentioned above, some participants even expressed disapproval toward this sense of "loss" experienced by others such as their parents. For example, Vanessa described a "rolling of eyes" response to others' descriptions of loss in the context of a loved one's gender transition. These participants seemed to convey that others' experiences of loss are guided by inaccurate beliefs and misperceptions of the transition (e.g., "Their whole life has been a lie until their transition"). If indeed the case, one may argue that a parent's or other family member's negative misappraisals of a transition may contribute to their own adjustment difficulties.

#### **4.2.4. Broader knowledge of trans issues and gender diversity**

Nine participants (82%) shared that the experience of having a sibling offered them increased knowledge and understanding of what it means to be transgender or gender-variant, as well as a deeper understanding of the social issues faced by these

individuals. In response to his brother's trans identity disclosure, Andre reported that he sought scientific and opinion-based information to form his own personal view of why someone such as his brother would decide to transition medically:

... I was getting opinions from people who are supportive of gender reassignment surgeries and people who aren't... [B]efore I heard the medical reason behind it, it seemed that there was nearly no point in doing it and it was kind of like a choice... [It] seemed like it was kind of maybe attention-seeking. But then... I saw actual research that was done and... it seemed to make more sense... I don't really see any real reason why someone would *want* to have a gender reassignment surgery. It's a lot of money and probably a lot of stress physically and mentally...

Three of these participants (27%) described discussions with their trans sibling as playing a contributory role in their own learning about gender diversity and trans-related issues.

I definitely have learned a lot from my sibling throughout this whole process. It's just kind of taken my already open-mindedness and acceptance to another level. I feel like they're constantly challenging me on all these different ideas, including recently, at the [2017] Women's March. There was this big discourse online about how it was transphobic because they were wearing the vagina hats and there was vagina art and they [my nonbinary sibling] said... "Oh, I think it's fine that there was vagina art, but it still made trans people feel excluded" ... And then it was this ongoing conversation of us challenging each other on our different ideas. (Phoebe)

Some participants described an improved understanding of the construct of gender within a political framework, sometimes informed by discussions with their trans/nonbinary siblings. For example, Maxine referred to her privilege as a cisgender person. Quinn discussed barriers to trans individuals in the health and mental health care systems and a lack of integration of gender literacy. For some participants, increased knowledge and understanding of gender diversity contributed to changes in their societal beliefs, leading them to advocate for gender education and trans-inclusion. The subtheme of the importance of trans education represents a related subtheme, further discussed below (see section 4.8.2).

### ***Discussion of subtheme***

Huang, Chen, and Ponterotto (2016) conducted a qualitative investigation of the experiences of Chinese American young adults with gay and lesbian siblings.

Participants described positive outcomes of their sibling's sexual orientation disclosure, including increased open-mindedness, learning, and self-reflection. Findings from the current study parallel those revealed by Huang et al. (2016), in which learning opportunities for cis siblings were experienced as positive by-products of their sibling's trans identity disclosure and transition.

Beyond the sibling dyad, interpersonal contact with minority groups has been correlated with reduced prejudice by majority group members. In particular, previous research has suggested that heterosexual individuals who have had contact with gay and lesbian individuals demonstrate reduced anti-gay prejudice. A survey of undergraduate students in a southeastern American university revealed reduced anti-gay prejudice by individuals who had contact with gay friends or with the gay community (Baunach, Burgess, & Muse, 2009). As demonstrated in a qualitative study, among heterosexual siblings of sexual minority individuals, increased exposure to other lesbian and gay individuals prior to and following a sibling's sexual orientation disclosure contributed to greater acceptance of participants' lesbian and gay siblings (Hilton & Szymanski, 2011). Similarly, results from an online survey revealed that heterosexual siblings' acceptance of their lesbian and gay siblings was correlated with higher-quality sibling relationships in adulthood, increased knowledge of lesbian and gay communities, more support for LGBT civil rights, more liberal political ideology, and higher education levels (Hilton & Szymanski, 2014). Previous empirical findings and those from the current investigation cumulatively suggest that exposure to a trans person in the sibling relationship may result in an increased understanding of their trans identity and may increase the likelihood that the cis sibling will participate in the greater trans or LGBTQ+ community.

Much of the current participants' broadened awareness of issues faced by their trans siblings and other gender-diverse individuals was related to access to medical care and social inclusion, two politicized issues. Oswald (2002) described the process through which families of gay and lesbian individuals recognize the social, economic, and legal discrimination faced by their gay and lesbian family member. It was suggested that by recognizing a family member's personal struggles, these individuals adopt a politicized concept of sexual minority identity (Oswald, 2002). Oswald's (2002) findings are echoed by those revealed through the current study, in which siblings of trans people

adopted a stronger voice against discrimination as a result of their increased understanding of the gender spectrum, as related to their sibling's trans identity.

#### **4.2.5. Personal strength, growth, and resilience**

Eight participants (73%) described their own personal strength and resilience through their and their families' experiences of their siblings' gender transition.

Dani felt that she modelled strength and stability to her parents and siblings during her brother's transition. She conveyed that her strength and stability served as a form of support to all family members.

I think the fact that I was okay and was strong for Keith showed the rest of my family that they can also be strong. I was like a pillar... I think just seeing my physical presence was in a good place still, that was important... When school started, I would just do my work and study... Life kept moving and I just kept going. And I was strong for my brother... I didn't stop to have a breakdown... I didn't stop to be like, *I need a break from life*. I didn't go to my professors and say, "I need to take a break because of a personal [issue]" ... And so, I think my parents, seeing that Keith coming out didn't bring me down at all in any way... that showed them that they also can.

Similarly, Vanessa described herself as the first immediate family member to both learn of, and accept, her brother as gender nonbinary, thus setting the tone for her parents to respond with acceptance as well.

I guess I was the initiating family support. I initiated the family environment in terms of the support system... Once Blake got security and support from me, they felt more confident gaining that support and security with my parents.

Reflecting upon her child sister's social transition, Mia described her family's process of learning to deal with new challenges over time. Rather than allowing mistakes to fester, Mia perceived mistakes as "necessary mistakes—things that kind of would have happened anyway." For example, she described learning to "speak up" for her transgender sister after having not "spoken up" following a previous inappropriate gender-related confrontation by a customer service associate at a car rental facility.

... I think that we've done a very good job. And there are all these things where you kind of think, *maybe we should've done it differently*. But at the same time, if you look back, you're like, *woah! What would we have done differently that would have actually just been infinitely better than*

*what we already did?... Things like the car dealership... how I wish we'd spoken up. But at the same time, not speaking up gave us the motivation to speak up other times.*

Two participants described their perseverance in striving toward personal aspirations in spite of a spotlight on their sibling's transition within each their families. For example, Lukas shared that he refused to allow either his brother's trans identity or previous medical needs to interfere with his own ambitions: "It's a matter of, I'm not going to let anything stop me from pursuing what I want to do."

Lukas advocated for the autonomy of cisgender siblings to choose how much they become involved in their trans siblings' transition. Despite parental pressure on Lukas to become more involved in the trans community, he described his personal decision to prioritize his personal goal achievement while nonetheless accepting his sibling as transgender.

*If you feel strongly about it, you can be an activist, but you don't have to be... You don't have to go and scream, "Hey! My sibling's transgender!" ... It's a matter of asking, what do I want to do? Do I want to be an advocate for this?... I am taking a step back and I'm saying, I am already too busy to put a huge amount of energy into it... I just simply don't want anything to stop me. A lot of people would probably want to be more involved with it... I'm going to accept them, but I've got other things to do...*

### ***Discussion of subtheme***

In positive psychology, researchers are continually attempting to best characterize how an individual develops and maintains characteristics that support their personal wellbeing and ability to live a meaningful life. As defined by Grevenstein, Aguilar-Raab, Schweitzer, and Bluemke (2016), the concept of *resilience* refers to "characteristics that enable staying healthy in the face of adversities and stress" (p. 208). Grevenstein et al. (2016) summarize several health-relevant constructs which overlap with the concept of resilience. Of these related constructs, *sense of coherence* and *dispositional optimism* are correlated to a variety of positive health-related behaviours and health outcomes (Eriksson & Lindström, 2006; Nilsson, Leppert, Simonsson, & Starrin, 2010; Carver, Scheier, & Segerstrom, 2010). These constructs help to describe the resilience communicated by participants in the current study.

*Sense of coherence* refers to an individual's ability to perceive stressful events in a clear manner, their self-perceived ability to manage challenges, and their confidence that these challenges are worthy of their investments (Antonovsky, 1987; Grevenstein et al., 2016). Individuals with a strong sense of coherence have confidence that things in the world will ultimately work out. Accordingly, the current study's participants' self-perceptions as resilient individuals seemed to rely upon their belief that they understood the ways in which their sibling's transition would contribute to family dynamics, parental resources, and the day-to-day family environment. For example, Lukas foresaw the likelihood of added parental pressures and responsibilities likely to be imposed on him related to his sibling's transition. He responded by recognizing his need to put forth effort to ensure that his daily activities align with his own aspirations. Participants such as Lukas conveyed a sense of intentionality and assertiveness in their efforts to resist potential adversities resulting from this family adjustment.

Grevenstein et al. (2016) also discuss the construct of *dispositional optimism*, referring to positive attitudes toward life events, including life stressors, and the expectation of positive results (Grevenstein et al., 2016; Scheier & Carver, 1985). In the current study, participants who demonstrated a sense of resilience tended to convey optimistic attitudes toward a sibling's transition, recognizing that their sibling's quality of life and their family circumstances would improve through their transition process. Further, these participants often shared their belief that their own positive attitudes would benefit their family members and lead to more positive outcomes for the entire family. For example, Dani analogized herself to a "pillar" through her brother's transition, which she contrasted with alternative of letting her brother's trans identity disclosure "bring [her] down." She described the importance of demonstrating her perseverance and positive attitude to her other family members as a form of modelling. As depicted in this example, personal resilience is not only self-sustaining, but also often serves the function of contributing to the betterment of the whole family.

Personal strength, growth, and resilience were described by most (eight; 73%) of the participants in the current study, notwithstanding challenging aspects of their sibling's transition, described elsewhere (e.g., see sections 4.1, 4.5, 4.7, and 4.8). The ability to understand and respond effectively to the complex experience of a sibling's transition represents an adaptive quality (i.e., sense of coherence) which reduces personal and family struggles over the course of this shared journey. The ability to

appreciate the complexities of a sibling's transition likely contributes to one's ability to recognize and envision the likelihood of positive outcomes for them, their sibling, and their family. If one can look ahead toward the future in a reasonable and optimistic way (i.e., dispositional optimism), then one is more apt to persevere beyond their current challenges. In sum, both "sense of coherence" and "dispositional optimism" represent key facets of participants' descriptions of personal strength, growth, and resilience over the course of their sibling's transition.

### **4.3. Relationship with trans sibling as stable, if not enhanced, through their gender transition**

Four participants (36%) described their relationships with their siblings as unique from their other family and peer relationships. Eight participants (73%) felt that their relationships with their trans siblings had not fundamentally changed as a result of their sibling's transition. Some of these participants drew connections between the unchanged nature of their relationship with their sibling and that sibling's longstanding incongruence with their gender assigned at birth. Five participants (46%) described themselves as assuming more of a role in protecting their sibling since their transition.

#### **4.3.1. Sibling relationship as a uniquely intimate source of support to the transitioning individual**

Four participants (36%) shared similar perspectives on the nature of the sibling relationship, in general, which they each characterized as a strong alliance within the family that uniquely resembles a close companionship.

... [I]t's just a different relationship. It's more like a peer relationship. And I guess that's what partly makes me feel comfortable. Like, my older sister will tell me to do things, and... sometimes I'm like, *oh that's a helpful suggestion*, and sometimes I'm like, *fuck off*. (Quinn)

...I'm around or I'm playing with her and I'm always kind of there for her... I don't think there's a huge aspect of authority. Like, my parents have 'authority' over Parker [transgender sister]. I sort of do, but not really... 'cause I'm older, but I don't really use that... So, I think just maybe feeling like we're on the same level, or maybe feeling more secure because I'm older than her and she know I'm looking out for her. But I guess feeling equal. That's kind of how I feel about it. (Mia)

Each of these four participants also emphasized the role of a sibling in a transgender youth's or young adult's social support network. For example, Quinn referred to the family systems perspective in understanding a trans person's support networks. She described the "family system" as "the people who are most important to you in terms of emotional support in your life." Through this lens, Quinn shared her belief that siblings, in addition to parents and grandparents, play a key role in an individual's emotional support system.

[F]or some people, that's chosen family, like your partner, or whatever. But usually with younger people, I mean usually, it's siblings and parents... But I don't want to generalize about anybody's family structure. But yeah, I mean, those are your core relationships. So, losing them or having them compromised is just so damaging.

Vanessa elaborated on how age proximity contributes to the sense of closeness and understanding shared between siblings.

The sibling's insight is a very close insight and a very intimate part of [the transition]. I guess there's not usually much sibling conflict when it comes to [a sibling's transition] because you're almost the same age most of the time, so it's not much of a life experience difference. I guess it would promote the normality of transitioning into being yourself.

Phoebe described the peer/ally roles enacted between siblings during significant family incidents. As an example, she described her recovery from an eating disorder (which involved her immediate family), as well as her sibling Peyton's gender identity disclosure, revealed to Phoebe before any of Peyton's peers or other family members.

When I was in Maudsley Family Therapy, they told us that the role of the sibling should be an ally, because the person who is sick may often alienate the parents or be against them, because the parents are the ones who are making you eat... And the sibling is supposed to be the role of the ally. They're supposed to be the friend... I went to them [Peyton] all the time, and I just cried to them all the time, and I talked to them about all my problems all the time. And they were absolutely amazing!

... I think it is the fact that Peyton came out to me before anyone else... I was the first one they told about wanting to wear dresses... of wanting to question their gender... Peers did come along after. But definitely I was the first one. And again, it's going back to the thing that I learned in Maudsley Family Therapy about the sibling being a role as a friend. I think that is a difficult role, especially [in] my family because... what someone is feeling has an impact on everyone else. But I also think it's important to recognize that your sibling is your oldest friend and also your oldest enemy. So, it's just important to know.

### ***Discussion of subtheme***

Four participants shared similar perspectives on the unique nature of the sibling relationship, characterized as one that is familial but resembles a relationship between close friends and allies. These four participants also emphasized the role of a sibling in a transgender youth's or young adult's social support network. In a study of college women, emotional support ties with their siblings were rated equally as strong as their ties with their mothers and stronger than their ties with their fathers (Cicirelli, 1980). This finding highlights the importance of emotional support between siblings, continued into emerging adulthood.

Research suggests that trust within sibling relationships correlates with sibling intimacy (McGuire, Segal, Gill, Whitlow, & Clausen, 2010). Further, trust predictive of intimate disclosures in sibling relationships (Howe, Aquan-Assee, Bukowski, Lehoux, & Rinaldi, 2001). The current participants' views of their sibling relationships as uniquely intimate. In keeping with the close sibling relationships described by most participants, most were informed directly by their trans or gender nonbinary sibling of their transgender identity.

With respect to trust and disclosure in LGBTQ+ sibling relationships, gay and lesbian individuals commonly describe a sense of equality in their sibling relationships, allowing for closeness and intimacy (Grafsky, Hickey, Nguyen, & Wall, 2018). Consistent with this finding, Toomey and Richardson (2009) found that sexual minority youth often came out to one of their siblings before coming out to other family members. Case study research (Jenkins, 2008) similarly suggests that some sexual minority siblings tend to come out to their heterosexual siblings first to gauge their reactions prior to coming out to parents and/or other family members. In this context, siblings play the unique and important role of providing their sexual minority sibling initial support and distress reduction regarding their sexual orientation. A sibling may also assist with decisions regarding how to come out to other family members (Shilo & Savaya, 2011).

Overlapping with prior research exploring sibling relationships among sexual minority groups, the current study suggests a unique role for siblings in a trans person's gender identity disclosure and social transition. It may be posited that a trans person's initial gender identity disclosure to their sibling contributes to a strong relationship bond, reinforced by the cis sibling's acknowledgement and acceptance of their sibling as trans.

Perhaps the sibling bond may be intensified when the trans person experiences invalidation or disapproval in their other close relationships (e.g., with parents and/or peers).

#### **4.3.2. Preserved perceptions of siblings and sibling relationships, with increased closeness for some**

Eight participants (73%) described no changes in their perceptions of their trans siblings or the quality of their relationships with them, apart from an increased sense of closeness (reported by four participants; 36%). Several participants related their unchanged view of their sibling to the impression that their sibling had presented as gender-nonconforming from a young age, long before they disclosed their transgender identity.

My sense of Shiloh as a person has not really changed that much, to be honest. I know that probably sounds super strange and maybe essentialist—Like, oh you have some core essential self beyond gender. But, that's just how I feel, especially 'cause Shiloh, before transitioning, already looked pretty androgynous. [He] has always kind of been, as a female, never very feminine. (Quinn)

In relation to the transition, I don't really think that much has changed because—There's kind of the stereotype of the big sister-little sister bond. But because from a very, very young age, Eddie was very masculine, even when using the female pronouns and stuff, I don't think we ever had that classic relationship. And so, when the transition happened, I've still cared for him as any big sibling would. And that just continued even more. Probably the only thing that's changed in our relationship is, because he's doing so much better mentally, we fight less often and we just get along better. (Maxine)

Celeste described a period of significant conflict with her transgender (twin) sister Nico, which occurred soon after Nico had come out as trans, and was left somewhat unresolved at the time of the interview. Nevertheless, Celeste conceptualized this conflict as a separate issue from Nico's transition, despite the proximity of these events. Ultimately, Celeste did not perceive Nico's transition itself to negatively impact their sibling relationship.

... And, I mean, [the incident resulting in sibling conflict] was a shitty, shitty situation, but... it gave me a different perspective on Nico's transition... [T]he fact that Nico was transgendered had nothing to do with it. It was our own inability to deal with a situation healthily. And the way that we were raised, being open to these sort of things, and

being personally open to these sort of things, made it easy to take her transition in stride. And the conflict was just something else entirely...

As mentioned above, four participants reported that their relationships with their trans siblings had become closer as a result of their transition. For example, during our member check, Andre wrote, "Having to go through the transition with him made our relationship stronger," representing a "slight change" in their relationship. Andre added that he "see[s] what his brother has been going through all these years and [has] respect for him going through what he has."

### ***Discussion of subtheme***

Most study participants described their relationships with their trans siblings as unscathed by their sibling's transition. In fact, many felt that their sibling relationships had benefited from shared experiences of disclosure, support, acceptance, and unified resilience. Possible protective factors which may have helped siblings to maintain their positive relationships were thus considered. Importantly, most study participants described their relationship with their transgender or gender nonbinary sibling as close and supportive prior to, and following, the transition. Given their supportive families and positive sibling relationships, it is less surprising that the current participants were untroubled by their sibling's transition.

Previous literature suggests that an adolescent's relationship with their sibling/s tend to become more voluntary as they transition into emerging adulthood (Aquilino, 2006), between the age of 18 and the mid-twenties (Arnett, 2006). Adolescents and young adults of this age range in the current study expressed a voluntary sense of loyalty toward their transgender siblings and described the maintenance of close relationships, even through tenuous periods. In the current study, longstanding feelings of closeness within the cis-trans sibling dyads likely helped to facilitate the transgender identity disclosures between siblings.

In qualitative research on sibling relationships between heterosexual and sexual minority individuals, researchers indeed describe an increased sense of closeness resulting from sexual identity disclosure. In Huang et al.'s (2016) aforementioned investigation, Chinese American young adults described closer sibling relationships with their gay and lesbian siblings by result of their siblings' sexual orientation disclosures. According to parental accounts (e.g., Pepper, 2012) and clinical impressions (e.g.,

Menvielle, 2012) of a child's trans identity, some parents of trans individuals ascribe positive meaning to the experience of having a trans family member, which they have sometimes related to a sense of increased closeness in their relationships with their trans children. Converging with previous literature on family members of LGBTQ+ individuals, four of the current study's participants described an increased sense of closeness with their trans sibling as a result of their gender identity disclosure and transition. Overall, it appears that relationship closeness (i.e., intimacy), trust, and disclosure (including gender identity disclosure) operate in a positive feedback loop within the cis-trans sibling dyad.

Relevant literature from families of individuals with autism spectrum disorder (ASD), typically diagnosed in childhood, may also help to inform the mechanisms through which a sibling relationship may sustain itself if not grow over the course of a sibling's transition. Van der Merwe, Bornman, Donohue, and Harty (2017) found that typically developing South African adolescents had more positive attitudes toward their siblings with ASD than they previously held as children. In Van der Merwe's study, it was hypothesized that one cause for this attitudinal change by these adolescents is that, since childhood, they may have developed improved understandings and abilities to cope with their sibling with ASD. Applying this hypothesis to findings from the current study, nine participants (82%) shared that the experience of their sibling's trans identity disclosure and transition offered them increased knowledge and understanding of what it means to be transgender or gender-variant (see section 4.2.4 above). Perhaps it is necessary for one to understand their sibling's unique experience as a trans person prior to expressing accurate empathy and compassion toward one's trans sibling. In turn, one's compassion for their trans sibling likely spurs and perpetuates the further expansion of one's knowledge of gender diversity. In other words, it is likely that an individual's knowledge of their sibling as trans and the individual's broader knowledge of gender diversity represent a mutually reinforcing relationship. Further, a sibling's interest in furthering their trans knowledge is likely recognized by one's trans sibling, thus likely leading to an increased sense of compassion and intimacy within the sibling relationship.

In sum, most participants described unchanged, if not positively changed, relationships with their trans siblings through their sibling's gender identity disclosure and transition. In consideration of findings from previous research and other findings from the current study, one can reasonably hypothesize that neutral to positive

impressions of a trans sibling and their transition are associated with the following factors: (a) perceived positive and close sibling relationships prior to a sibling's gender identity disclosure; (b) an enhanced sense of closeness through the shared experience of this disclosure itself; (c) the cis sibling's pre-existing knowledge and understanding of what it means to be trans or gender-diverse; and (d) an evolving understanding of what it means to be trans or gender-diverse following a sibling's gender identity disclosure.

### **4.3.3. Role as protector of younger trans sibling**

Five participants (46%) described an enhanced duty to protect their trans sibling from social/emotional harm, such as bully victimization. These participants were each older than their trans sibling whom they felt the responsibility to protect. Of note, this theme was represented by all participants in the study who were older than their trans sibling. In keeping with their birth order, all five participants indicated that they had previously felt the responsibility to protect their younger sibling even prior to their gender identity disclosure. All five participants described their role in protecting their sibling as enhanced as a result of their sibling's gender-nonconforming presentation, followed by their openly trans identity.

... So, for a very long time, Eddie had... emotional regulation issues. So a lot of our family structure was around making Eddie happy... And that affected me... I didn't know how to help. He would push me away anytime I tried to talk to him about what was going on. And then also, I was putting a lot of pressure on myself, because my dad was "gone," my mom was so busy with work and with trying to deal with my dad... And so, the fact that *I* couldn't control the household and make Eddie happy, that was a huge stress for me... (Maxine)

Mia also described her understanding of Parker's vulnerabilities as a transgender child as a factor contributing to Mia's protective attitude toward her.

I guess that just 'cause I've been super active in her experience transitioning, and just the fact that having her be transgender as part of her identity, that makes me more protective... [I]t's gonna be harder for her. She's gonna have a tougher go at life in general, especially when she gets older. I want her to be able to be a kid, and I feel like when someone identifies as transgender, that's a very kind of adult concept; like, it's very hard for a kid to kind of deal with, let alone anyone. So I think it's just important for her to be able to be a kid, and just not wanting anyone to get in the way of that for her.

She indicated that her sense of responsibility to protect Parker was partially a response to having witnessed Parker being bullied due to her gender nonconformity.

I've always been protective of Parker because, even before she identified like that, she was being discriminated against and she was being bullied at school just because kids could tell she was different... So, I've always been more protective of her.

Throughout our interview, Mia used plural first-person pronouns (i.e., we, us, our/s) when discussing family decisions regarding playdates, schooling (e.g., "...we don't really want anyone at her school to know..."), and the medical care of Parker, her younger trans sister (e.g., "... we still need to go to appointments to see if she's nearing puberty..."), which I interpreted to reflect her perceived co-responsibility over her trans sister.

### ***Discussion of subtheme***

From a family psychology perspective, the role of the cisgender sibling acting in protection of their trans sibling represents a possible example of sibling parentification, or the adoption of a parental role by a non-caregiver. Literature on parentification is mainly focused on the parent-child dyad. Within this dyad, a role reversal between a parent and child may occur, whereby a child takes on the role of the "parent" to their own parent, often with repercussions on the child. In the current example, the cis siblings described themselves as taking on the parental-type role of providing emotional support and protection of their trans sibling to help reduce their sibling's gender minority stress. None of the current participants communicated that this added role led to long-term consequences to themselves or their family relationships. Furthermore, a child's parent-like responsibilities over another sibling may be less consequential to the "parentified" sibling when the parent-like role is voluntary and the parents have not surrendered their own responsibilities as primary caregivers and decision-makers. For example, Mia took part in caring for her trans sister, and providing her parents with knowledge and advice, within the context of a cohesive family "team." She described her parents as overseeing all aspects of Parker's gender identity consolidation and transition and described her own involvement in Parker's care as voluntary. Therefore, a sibling's added role as protector of their younger trans sibling may not necessarily be detrimental, or even unhealthy, in the context of families with engaged and supportive parents.

The current finding builds on previous research exploring families of gender and sexual minority individuals. In a qualitative study by Levitt, Horne, Puckett, Sweeney, and Hampton (2015), nine of 10 African American gay or transgender interviewees described supporting their family members through the provision of emotional support, resources, and skills, to help stifle marginalization. The current study further demonstrates that individuals with younger trans siblings often feel the duty to protect their gender-minority siblings themselves. Considering the past and current findings combined, both cisgender individual and their trans siblings may identify with the role of protecting one another: the cis sibling protecting their trans sibling from stigma associated with their gender minority identity; the trans sibling protecting their cis sibling from *secondary stigma* associated with having a gender minority sibling.

#### **4.4. The importance of showing respect, compassion, and support toward trans siblings**

All 11 participants (100%) described one or more ways in which they demonstrated support of their trans sibling and their gender transition, including the acceptance and validation of their sibling's affirmed gender identity. All 11 participants also advocated for the respect for their sibling's dignity, including their autonomy and information privacy. All but one participant (10; 91%) explicitly expressed validation and compassion for their siblings as transgender. Six (55%) shared that they engaged in quality time with their siblings in low-pressure contexts. Three participants (27%) stated that they helped to facilitate their trans sibling's access to resources and other social supports. Lastly, five participants (46%) described supporting their siblings through community action and allyship.

##### ***General discussion of theme***

The ways in which participants described supporting their trans siblings corresponded with four subtypes of social support: emotional/affective support, informational support, instrumental support, and companionship (Bambina, 2007; Ogle, Park, Damhorst, & Bradley, 2016). Regarding the value of social support to the recipient, in a study exploring the self-reported social networks of gay men and transgender women in Guatemala City (Tucker, Arandi, Bolaños, Paz-Bailey, & Barrington, 2014), gay-identifying men reportedly identified siblings as important sources of support in

addition to their mothers. However, transgender participants' social networks were seldom described to include their family members. Unfortunately, the three transgender women who did list family members in their social networks described their gender minority identities as hinderances on their relationships. Several factors may contribute to the marked discrepancy between the lack of support from family members towards transgender participants in the study by Tucker et al., (2014) and the supportive roles described by cisgender siblings in the current study. For example, the families of participants represented in the current study generally described having trans-affirmative families and supportive parents, which would likely contribute to closer relationships before and after a family member's gender identity disclosure. Culturally-competent research on the perspectives of trans individuals is required to clarify whether cultural differences may further contribute to the differences between study findings. Lastly, the observed discrepancy between these two studies may reflect possible differences in the ways in which a trans person and their cis sibling perceive the transition process. Cisgender siblings may lack awareness or accurate insight into the degree of social conflict, rejection, and isolation experienced by their trans sibling, even within a family unit that is perceived as supportive by the cisgender sibling.

#### **4.4.2. Respect for a sibling's dignity**

All 11 participants (100%) emphasized the importance of respecting their trans sibling's dignity, including their autonomy and information privacy. Even prior to one's transgender identity disclosure, Dani advocated for the individual liberty of trans individuals to come out to others at their own pace, as exemplified when her sibling came out to her.

...I know that I should respect their feelings and that they want to come out at their own pace—that I shouldn't go around telling everyone I know. I didn't even tell my best friend until [my brother] was ready for people to know... [H]e didn't even tell my extended family right away. He needed some time to adjust and let us get used to it. It wasn't like an explicit request like, "Don't tell this person, don't tell that person." It was sort of just, like, I'm not telling all my friends yet.... I was like, I probably shouldn't tell people yet. It's not my information to share, right? So it's a privacy thing, for sure. And I respect that. And some people don't respect that.

Mia similarly emphasized the principle of confidentiality (e.g., "Some things should remain kind of confidential"). However, she also described her personal challenge of

balancing respect for her sister's privacy with efforts to protect her by disclosing her transgender identity to others on her behalf.

If I'm with total strangers, or just some acquaintances, I would never talk about it [sibling being trans] ... not kind of making it everybody's business, but only putting it out there at appropriate times... It's hard with friends because, playdates, we like to disclose that she is transgender before anyone comes over to our house or she goes over to someone else's house, just to protect her. Because we don't know how that person would react, and to have her alone at their house, or them over here, that kind of puts both people in an uncomfortable situation... I don't think anyone at her school knows that she's transgender because we don't want her to get that hate for that, and because it isn't the biggest part of her. But it's hard to kind of pick and choose when that information should be disclosed.

Vanessa described addressing her nonbinary sibling by their chosen name and chosen gender-neutral pronouns as a constituent of showing her respect for them.

...It's just easy for me to adjust [to Blake's pronoun change] because my value is respect. I really value respect. So, you know, that's all Blake's asking for, is a pronoun change. That's also why those questions about, "Why 'they'? Isn't that wrong?" – You know, I'm just like, that's your business you need to work out. Just respect Blake and call them "they."

Quinn described respect for Shiloh's autonomy in determining his own future and exercising his own reproductive rights, regardless of her or her family members' personal preferences or concerns.

I think of my family members, I've been the most forward-looking, where as other people in my family have said things to me like, "What if he changes his mind?" Or, my mum's like, "Maybe he should freeze his eggs." Things I've always just been like, *woah, woah, woah, this is Shiloh's choice and Shiloh's identity*. So, I think for me that's part of it... I've almost set aside some of my own feelings, I think.

Several participants also emphasized the principle of privacy, indicating that they refrain from initiating conversations with their siblings around the medical aspects of the transition. Several participants shared that discussing aspects of the transition with others or identifying their sibling as transgender without their sibling's consent would breach both their sibling's privacy as well as their trust in their cisgender siblings as a confidant. For example, Quinn conveyed that she refrains from discussing with Shiloh any potential future gender-affirming medical interventions, as she considers these to be private matters.

[The medical transition] would definitely be on the table, but I wouldn't ask about it at this point... I wouldn't want someone asking me about my plans for my genitals. [laughs] Like, "What are your plans?" I would be like, "Ummm..."

### ***Discussion of subtheme***

All participants communicated the principle of respecting the dignity of their trans sibling, consistent with Miller's (2016) theoretical notion of queer *self-determination*, described as follows:

"... the right to make choices to self-identify in a way that authenticates one's self-expression, and which has potential for the embodiment of self-acceptance... It presumes choice and rejects an imposition to be externally controlled, defined, or regulated... It means that any form of (a) gender or (b) sexuality begets the same inalienable rights *and* should be afforded the same dignities and protections." (p. 261)

Miller and other queer theorists rely on the moral principles of dignity and self-determination of queer and trans folk in order to effectuate social change. Practical applications of this principle are described in the context of the *queer literacy framework*.

As per the *Canadian Code of Ethics for Psychologists* (Canadian Psychology Association, 2017), "Respect for the Dignity of Persons and Peoples" (p. 11-17) is regarded as a central principle in ethical decision-making by psychologists. This principle includes ethical standards such as general respect, non-discrimination, consent, privacy, and confidentiality, each reflected by the current study's participants. Regarding *consent*, some participants described a moral responsibility to obtain the consent of their sibling to disclose their transgender identity, rather than disclosing a sibling's trans identity without their knowledge or permission. In keeping with the standard of *privacy*, several participants morally condemned any questions regarding a trans person's sex/reproductive organs or their desires or status regarding gender-affirming surgical intervention. With respect to *confidentiality*, participants frequently expressed their views that incidental information about their siblings' gender identities should be kept private. Furthermore, participants commonly described gender-affirming language decisions, such as using their sibling's chosen name and pronouns, paralleling the all-encompassing standards of *general respect* and *non-discrimination*, as outlined by the Canadian Psychology Association.

### 4.4.3. Validation and compassion for a sibling as transgender

Ten of 11 participants (91%) expressed validation and compassion for their siblings as transgender. Participants' compassion was informed by an understanding of the ignorance, stigma, and injustice which their siblings must bear.

And then when she said, "No, no, I feel female." And we're like, oh... okay. So, you can feel female and still dress the way you want. And if the way you want is still sweater, jeans, and just sneakers, then that doesn't invalidate the female part of your identity. (Celeste)

Finding a school was so hard for our family, just because people weren't seeing her for who she was. They were seeing her as this very complicated transgender kid, like, *how are we going to figure out how to fit this kid into our school? They're transgender. What are we going to do? Blah, blah, blah, blah, blah.* So that was pretty hard, but I think it's just because people were not seeing her for who she was. They were just seeing a small part of her. (Mia)

[As a trans person] you're still a human, right? Like, if you're pansexual, you're still a human. If you're gender-fluid, you're still a human, right? Live and breathe and talk and have friends... Trans people are humans. (Dani)

For several participants, validation of their siblings as transgender included abstaining from treating their siblings as fragile due to being trans. For example, Andre stated that he is not overly sensitive in his communication with his brother just because he is transgender.

[We] still kind of talk to each other the same way, not more like, gentle or anything, I guess you could say—like how some people are after they find out something about someone.

Lukas similarly stated:

... I'm respecting [being trans] and I'm not going to treat this person any differently because of anything. I will judge somebody on their actions and how they treat other people, not by what they choose to be.

Dani indicated that treating someone as fragile could make this person *more* fragile, resulting in a self-fulfilling prophecy. She added that a trans person does not "want to feel like an outcast." Mia highlighted the importance of offering her sister support while respecting her autonomy.

... I just think people should be allowed to be who they are. And we don't need to be totally smothering them with our love or anything... But we also definitely should not be telling them it's wrong either. So I think there's a middle-ground.

### ***Discussion of subtheme***

This subtheme is interconnected with that of respecting the dignity of one's trans sibling, described in section 4.4.2, above. Beyond respecting a sibling's autonomy and privacy, participants described their understanding of what it means for a sibling to identify as trans and expressed compassion for them.

*Empathy* refers to the recognition and understanding of another's emotions and experiences (Baron-Cohen, 2005), while *compassion* refers to the caring for another person and the shared experience of their suffering (Leahy, 2005; Thwaites & Bennett-Levy, 2007), as discussed previously. Participants in the current study conveyed compassion for their siblings, as well as increased compassion for the greater trans community as a result of having a trans sibling. Previous studies have found that when compassion or warmth is conveyed toward a sibling rather than hostility or aggression, siblings tend to engage in less problem behaviours following stressful events (Soli, McHale, & Feinberg, 2009). It may thus be expected that the display of warmth and compassion by cis individuals toward their trans siblings may reduce both party's distress associated with the transition.

*Validation* is a construct that overlaps closely with those of empathy and compassion. Marsha Linehan (1997), the founder of dialectical behaviour therapy (DBT), describes validation as the communication that a client's perspective makes sense given and is understandable given their life context. Validation is used by DBT therapists as a strategy to help regulate a client's affect. Validation has also been described by Leahy (2005, p. 196; Thwaites & Bennett-Levy, 2007) as "finding the truth in what we feel and think." Current study participants validated the experiences of their trans siblings by demonstrating that they see them as people with genuine human experiences, irrespective of their gender identity. In addition, participants recognized that their siblings also have experiences that are specific to the lives as trans people, such as gender minority stress and the process of transitioning. By acting compassionately toward their siblings and by validating various elements of their lived experiences, most participants communicated a deep sense of respect for their trans siblings.

#### 4.4.4. Engagement in low-pressure quality time

Six participants (55%) reported that they provided support to their trans siblings by spending time with them in low-pressure contexts, particularly during challenging periods in their siblings' transitions. For example, Quinn stated that she does not expect anything from her sibling during these interactions (i.e., having “no hidden agenda”). She described this attitude of being with someone without an ulterior motive as an important means of demonstrating support for anyone who is struggling.

[F]or Rosh Hashana [the Jewish new year] for this year, Shiloh made challah and he's like texting me about the dough. So we'll do these things together... I think it is just a relationship where I'll just spend time with Shiloh and it'll be very low-pressure. And I think that that's good when you're going through something hard, 'cause you know the person isn't gonna be like, “Now that we've finished this activity, you have to tell me how you're doing.”

Dani also described a casual approach to supporting her brother while recovering from his gender-affirming surgery.

I just checked in on him, made sure he was okay. But really my mom took time off work so she could sort of hang out with him, keep him company, make sure he was okay. We all just sort of wanted to spend time with him while he was recovering just so that he wasn't bored and lonely. So yeah, we just hung out. That was my role... If I had work to do, I would take it to the couch and hang out instead of doing it by myself in my room.

Similarly, Celeste emphasized the importance of meeting a trans sibling where they are at, rather than pushing them to further accept themselves in their affirmed gender.

You just have to show your support and you have to show that you can be there, but also know that you can't force them to come to terms right away, and that it's something that they need to—It takes some people a while. And that's okay.

Celeste also admitted that she struggled to balance expressions of open emotionality with her casual approach to communicating with her trans sister.

[I]t's weird to be so heart-to heart; it's just, it feels unnatural for us. And it's hard to also balance being totally supportive in a nonchalant way... I try really hard, but it doesn't always come across. Nonchalant can sometimes come across as cold. Where you're just trying to make it low-pressure and you're like, I care a lot and I just don't know how to say it.

### ***Discussion of subtheme***

Social support researchers recognize *companionship*, “the sharing of everyday activities and ideas with others” (Ogle et al., 2016, p. 177; Bambina, 2007), as one of four types of social support. The act of spending casual time with one’s sibling over the course of their transition helps to maintain the message that the transition is valid and that their sibling relationship is valid. Moreover, by participating in the same activities with their siblings as always, participants are conveying that they see their trans sibling as their *sibling*, irrespective of their gender identity. Continued engagement in regular activities with one’s trans sibling may reassure one’s trans sibling the quality and authenticity of the sibling relationship will not be compromised in response to their transition.

As mentioned above, Celeste admitted that she struggled to balance open-heartedness communication with a nonchalant approach to communicating with her trans sister. The conflict described here mirrors the parental task of providing a child with a balance of autonomy and support in a way that matches their developmental status (Aquilino, 2006). In a qualitative study exploring social support among female breast cancer patients who were awaiting surgery (Drageset, Lindstrom, Giske, & Underlid, 2012), social support was important for all women, but was sometimes experienced as burdensome and intrusive. These findings collectively highlight the challenge of balancing one’s presence and distance when supporting a loved one through a personal challenge, including but not limited to the process of transitioning.

#### **4.4.5. Helping to facilitate access to informational and social support resources**

Three of the 11 participants (27%) reported that they supported their trans sibling by helping them to facilitate access to practical information and/or social support. Notably, each of these three participants stated that their trans siblings had, at some point, sought out such guidance, advice, or support from them.

[B]eing an ally to me is like being supportive, being a friend, not being judgmental, and being willing to go out and do something with one of my [gay and transgender] brothers. If they want to go to a bar, I'll go with them... I don't want to say that they need help dating because they don't. But if they wanted help, you can't be like, yeah, I'm your ally, but I won't lead you in the right direction. 'Cause then you're not being

supportive. You know? It has so many components. I think one of them is knowing places to go, or maybe even knowing people that you could talk to for them, or that you could set them up to talk with each other... So, that's part of being an ally. (Dani)

I definitely did some concrete resourcing for Shiloh, and at points where Shiloh wasn't necessarily able to do that for himself... I think it matters a lot, no matter what you're going through. If you're going through something really, really hard, if there's someone else who's like, "Can I make that phone call for you?" or, "Can I go with you to the—" or "Can I buy you—" ... I totally did stuff like that... Almost like a facilitator... this experience of just being like, okay, your mental health is not at the point where you can do this, but this is what you need, and I'm just going to do it for you... I remember just being like, oh crap. I need to find some support or help. And then finding this group, and then asking Shiloh if he wanted to go, and he was like, "I'm too shy." And I was like, "What if we met the facilitator beforehand together, would you then go?" And he was like, "Yeah." So I emailed the facilitator... And then we met... me, Shiloh, and [the facilitator]. (Quinn)

Quinn also described her own queer identity and knowledge of queer social networks as advantageous with regard to her access to information about trans support services, including a trans youth group for Shiloh.

It [Quinn's sexual minority identity] ... did play a role for me. I was also quite informed because of that. Like, I had known trans people. I had a lot of gay friends. I could text someone and be like, "Who do I ask about the trans youth group?" I definitely had access.

### ***Discussion of subtheme***

This subtheme demonstrates that some siblings of trans individuals view themselves as having a role in assisting their sibling with access to trans-related information and resources to support their wellbeing and quality of life. Participants frequently defined the primary task of this role as the facilitation or enhancement of social network ties (i.e., with other members of the queer or trans community and/or with care providers). Based on these participant descriptions, cis siblings of trans folk may be conceptualized as liaisons or *linkage agents* (see Orlandi, Landers, Weston, & Haley, 1990), who promote the exchange of knowledge between a resource user (i.e., the trans sibling) and the greater resource system (i.e., trans social and health networks). By engaging in these tasks, participants supported their siblings to broaden their social relationships and develop new social resources. Further, resource mobilization through social networks increases an individual's ability to cope with stressors (e.g., Viswanath,

2008, p 275). Participants' resource offerings would enable their trans sibling to better respond to their own social and informational needs in the future.

#### **4.4.6. Engagement in community action and allyship**

Five participants (46%) described supporting their siblings through engagement in LGBTQ+ or trans-specific community actions, such as GSA membership and participation in Pride events. For example, five of the nine participants who were in high school described themselves active members of their school's Gay-Straight Alliance. Three participants stated that they had participated in municipal Pride events and other local trans pride-related events. Two participants stated that they have also engaged in other transgender rights and education-related events, including local marches and protests. One of these participants stated that she had taken on a role as an LGBTQ+ educator prior to her sibling coming out as trans. These participants tended to describe their sibling's trans identity as influential to the participant's own decision to become engaged, or more engaged, in the LGBTQ+ community.

Several participants described themselves as allies of the trans community. However, participants' conceptualizations and enactments of what it means to be an ally, and in the contexts in which they identified as such, varied profoundly. Allyship was described as including: compliance with the wishes of trans individuals (i.e., respecting chosen names and pronouns, demonstrating interest in the lives of transgender siblings and peers); taking on the responsibility of being informed of trans issues; volunteering one's social support to their siblings and other trans folk and family members; taking a vocal stand against transphobia when encountered; and/or becoming involved in the trans or LGBTQA+ community. Mia regarded her role as an ally as a necessary component of protecting her younger transgender sister, a child at the time of this study: "I kind of had to be an ally, just from a protective standpoint, with regards to my sister."

Dani believed that *secondary stigma* due to having a trans sibling was the only potential negative risk associated with being a sibling and ally of the LGBTQ+ community.

The only risk [in being an ally] is that there are people in the world who are opposed to this lifestyle, you know? There are some people who don't understand, and they'll never accept it, and they're a threat, right?

... There are people who might harass me for having a gay and a trans brother. You never know what kind of people there are.

Other participants were uncomfortable labelling themselves an “ally.”

My mum tells me that I'm an ally and advocate, but I've never been like, I am an advocate! And an ally! ... Other people have told me, “You're an ally or advocate to trans people” ... I get it, but I don't really say that. (Iris)

[The term *ally*] feels awkward 'cause I don't think of myself... I don't see it that way. I don't think of myself in terms of a certain word. (Quinn)

### ***Discussion of subtheme***

In several previous qualitative studies, siblings and other family members of sexual minority individuals described increased involvement in LGBTQ+ social movements after learning of their family member’s sexual orientation (e.g., Arm, Horne, & Levitt, 2009; English, 2008; Hilton & Syzmanski, 2011; Huang, Chen, & Ponterotto, 2016). Siblings in Hilton and Syzmanski’s (2011) study reported that their engagement in issues of LGBT rights led to increased acceptance of their gay and lesbian siblings. In Huang et al.’s (2016) study, half of the heterosexual Chinese American siblings of lesbian and gay interviewees described an increased role in advocating for their siblings and for LGBTQ+ issues more generally.

Regarding expressions of allyship to gender-diverse individuals, Rahilly (2015) described parents’ efforts to improve their children’s gender literacy, to teach them about transphobia, and to coach them on how to respond to comments from peers and potential harassment. Moreover, Rahilly’s “gender literacy” includes the parent’s role in transferring trans education to their cisgender children and advocating for gender-inclusiveness in their children’s schools and other public institutions. Current study findings suggest that siblings of TGN individuals with at least somewhat supportive and informed parents (as represented in this study) do engage in awareness-raising of trans issues as a means of supporting their trans family members. Those siblings who recognized the possibility of experiencing secondary stigma, due to having a trans sibling, were not deterred by this risk. It is unclear whether participants viewed their increased LGBTQ+ community involvement as influenced by the activities and preferences of their parents.

In the context of family therapy, Harper and Singh (2014) describe a role for families in demonstrating allyship to their TGN family members and proposed a model for allyship development of cisgender family members. Adapted from Jordan's (2012) heterosexual identity ally development (HAID) model, Harper and Singh's proposed strategies for ally development included TGN-affirming intake processes, family psychoeducation, and role-plays to practice skills such as responding to bullying or communicating with school personnel. This list of strategies was echoed in the current participants' accounts of the ways in which they managed difficult peer interactions in the current study (see section 4.7.3). Although Harper and Singh (2014) did not address ally development within the sibling relationship specifically, the current study suggests that siblings from at least somewhat trans-affirming families develop identities as allies through the experience of having a sibling transition.

#### **4.5. Shared, manageable adjustments by the broader family unit**

Six participants (55%) emphasized the broad view that their family dynamics were predominantly unchanged by their sibling's trans identity and gender transition. Four participants (36%) described closer relationships with one or more parent as a result of their shared experiences of their family member's transition. Nonetheless, participants described specific and sometimes temporary changes in family dynamics, including relationships with their parents and their personal family roles. An equal number of participants (six; 55%) described periods in which one or more parent focused disproportionately on their trans sibling, resulting in the reduced personal attention from their parent/s. In addition, six participants (55%) described having assumed the imposed role as intermediaries between their parents and their trans sibling. Three participants (27%) described their sibling's transition as one of several factors which contributed to the accumulation of stress in their families. Lastly, four participants (36%) described family dynamics as gradually settling and returning to a homeostasis following a period during which the sibling's transition took precedence in the family.

#### 4.5.1. Collective experience of a “family transition”

Five participants (46%) conveyed the notion that at least some aspects of their experience of their sibling’s transition were shared collectively by the immediate family (i.e., the concept of a “family transition”). Mia regarded all immediate family members as actively involved in the transition process, collectively supporting Parker throughout.

[I]t really is a team effort. So everybody [in my family] has their opinions put in and everybody's opinion is valued and listened to... Because it's not just Parker transitioning; it feels like we're *all* transitioning 'cause we're *all* going through it together. And everybody's been very involved... [I]t's not like any of us are just sitting and letting it happen. We're very concerned for Parker and very interested in what's going on... And for me it feels like, since Parker is changing, that changes the dynamic of the family... And we need to change certain things to make sure that dynamic still kind of works...

Phoebe identified with the concept of a “family transition,” noting the contagion of emotions experienced by her family.

... [I]n my experience, if one person is having a difficult time, the whole family is having a difficult time. Especially in my family, everyone's really close which is a good thing 'cause we're really close, but it's also sometimes a bad thing 'cause we're always in each other's business. And if one person's having a bad time, everyone is.

Vanessa and Maxine similarly conceived the transition of a family member as an intimate family experience, resulting in a unified sense of acceptance, openness, and compassion for the trans family member and for the greater trans community.

... [I]f something like this happens within the family, you know, it's to someone that they love deeply. So honestly, there's unconditional love there... so it helps families and people achieve more open and broad thoughts and feelings in terms of liberalness and being able to accept those kinds of things. So maybe someone might not accept fully gay people; but when their son's gay, that can be a transition in views... It's like a switch in values because someone they love is affected by something like that. (Vanessa)

I mean, I know that obviously some parents can't get passed it when it's even their own child. But [for my] dad and my mom, any reservations of, and sort of phobias they may have had, as soon as they realized that their son was like this, it disappeared. (Maxine)

### ***Discussion of subtheme***

The shared experience of a “family transition” reflects the family systems perspective, which recognizes the family as an interdependent system in which all family members are affected by a life transition of one member (Lindell & Campione-Barr, 2017). Some scholars refer to the interconnection between family members as the “linked lives” phenomenon, highlighting that a family shares experiences as a result of the linked individual experiences of each member (Elder, 1998). The interconnected lives of family members may contribute to shared beliefs and perspectives within a family, a concept known as *family perception* (e.g., Garwick, Detzner, & Boss, 1994). In the context of managing a family stressor, Boss, Bryant, and Mancini (2017) have defined family perception as “the group’s unified view of a particular stressor event or situation” (p. 11). I use the term *family transition* to refer to the interconnected and shared experiences of a family unit, as perceived by the study’s participants, in response to a family member’s gender transition. Notably, most participants in the current study described close or very close sibling relationships and family units, likely emboldening the experiential ties among family members during this critical family experience.

Shared family experiences were also apparent within the participants’ cis-trans sibling dyads. For example, participants related to empathic sadness/concern as well as empathic happiness/pride (discussed in Chapter 4) in response to their trans siblings’ emotional pain and triumph, respectively, over the course of their transition. These empathic experiences bring to light the social-emotional mechanisms through which one may derive meaning from their sibling’s transition, often contributing to one’s personal life narrative (as discussed in section 4.1.1 above).

The notion of the “family transition” in the context of a family member’s gender identity disclosure and transition may be further understood through the framework of the family life cycle (Carter & McGoldrick, 1989). Within this framework, normative transitional life phases within a family include independence, coupling or marriage, parenting, launching adult children, and retirement or senior years. Any of these transitional periods may be disrupted by an individual’s and/or their family members’ life stressors or crises (Abbey & Dallos, 2004). Examples of situations that may disrupt the family life cycle include marital separation/divorce, unemployment, serious physical or mental illness, legal troubles, and teen pregnancy. Unlike families with exclusively

cisgender family members, it may be argued that families with a gender-minority member may additionally experience transitional periods during one's gender identity disclosure/s and over the gradual social and/or physical course of this gender transition, often spanning across several months or years. A gender transition disrupts the cisnormative-heteronormative family cycle, requiring the negotiation of modified life stages diverging from those that have been defined and reinforced by the gender binary system. In this sense, transgender visibility may continue to challenge the previously assumed cis-hetero-family life cycle. Previously, the expected family life cycle has diversified in response to the mainstreaming of divorce (Abbey & Dallos, 2004; Carter & McGoldrick, 1989). The broadening of the family life cycle to accommodate sexual and gender diversity is thus plausible.

#### **4.5.2. Communication of sibling's transition with other family members as desired and beneficial**

Seven participants (64%) reported at least some communication with their parents or other family members regarding their sibling's trans identity and/or gender transition.

... [W]e've watched documentaries about people that have transitioned, and we see things about hormone blockers. We're like, *okay, that is potentially down the line for us*. We don't know what we're gonna do about it, but that is something that is down the line... I would like to be included in those conversations. And so far, my mom has been updating me. Because I care for Parker and I'm concerned; I want to know what's happening. (Mia)

Most of the participants who discussed their sibling's transition with other family members reported a background of open communication between family members.

I think, since our family's so close, that was like the key. And communication definitely plays a vital role in a healthy transition. (Dani)

On the flipside, four participants (36%) described a lack of communication within their family around their sibling's trans identity and gender transition, if not a total absence of such. These participants experienced at least subtle consequences, including confusion in response to their sibling's trans identity disclosure.

... I wish that there was a bit more communication [about the transition]. I wish that my parents had been more open about the things that they

were considering... I'm sure my parents were thinking, *this is just a small idea. We don't even know that much about it. We don't want to tell Maxine and then have it not happen, and then that would be even more confusing for her.* But the fact that [the transition] *did* happen... for me it was really sudden... (Maxine)

### ***Discussion of subtheme***

Overall, participants positively appraised their communications with family members regarding a sibling's initial gender nonconformity, trans identity, and transition. In contrast, a lack of communication between family members regarding a sibling's trans identity and transition was deemed at least somewhat adverse for participants.

With respect to the aforementioned family communication patterns theory (see section 1.2 above), it may be posited that one's trans identity disclosure and transition may be easiest to process by families who have open communication (i.e., high conversation orientation) and who have a high degree of agreement between their beliefs and values with respect to gender.

In Abrams's (2009) clinical writings on therapy for families of an individuals with a mental illness, she recommended that the entire family be invited to engage in treatment and that education about the illness be provided to all family members, including "well" siblings who may have limited understanding of their "ill" sibling's condition. As an extension of this recommendation, it may be suggested that parents of trans children initiate dialogue with their cis children about their trans child's trans identity and transition in order to promote the understanding and inclusion of all family members. If such communication is too difficult for parents to facilitate on their own, perhaps they may benefit from the support of professional clinicians experienced in working with families of gender variant folk.

### **4.5.3. Parental attention as directed disproportionately toward trans sibling**

Six participants (55%) shared the impression that one or more parent had disproportionately attended to their transgender sibling at some point during their sibling's transition process. Two of these participants denied any repercussions.

[W]ith my mum, sometimes it did feel like she [Celeste's transgender sister] was getting more attention. Now I can see it was because she needed it... I don't think it impacted our relationship overly. (Celeste)

In contrast, four participants experienced one or more parent as unapproachable for periods during the transition. These participants indicating that their parents did not sufficiently check in with them about their own experience of the transition or their other life experiences at the time. These participants described feeling somewhat overlooked, less important, or less "special" to their parents, at least temporarily.

[M]y mom was sort of, like at the very beginning, she was so into doing the research and becoming part of the community, and doing her due diligence, that I felt a little forgotten actually... I don't have a defining feature, per se. But it doesn't mean that I'm not special too, you know... (Dani)

... [I]t was interesting having so many resources poured onto Eddie because even though I'm a classic first child; responsible, good in school, high-achieving... Even though I didn't *need* that effort put into me... I think unconsciously I was like, *give me attention!* ... I guess it just sort of gave me the belief that I'm not worthy of attention, or my problems aren't significant enough to warrant that attention, because Eddie's problems were so much more than mine. And I wouldn't say that there was a lack of attention... But because I was internalizing it, I think I convinced myself that I couldn't go to them always. And so, for a while I was definitely thinking that I had to deal with my problems by myself... I do think it was really hard on me. And I think that, unfortunately, that's kind of played into my development now... I'm still working through the belief that I have that other people's wants and needs come before my own... (Maxine)

It's been two years and at every family get-together it's always about Blake. And I'm not a fan of attention so I don't really mind, but I've just noticed it... No one really talks about me anymore. I mean, I just find it funny; I'm not sad. But then people lose what they know about me. 'Cause I'm changing as a person as well... I've just been so overwhelmed with it [the transition] lately... It's awesome and that's great, but it doesn't always need to be the topic of discussion. (Vanessa)

[M]y mum, at times, I feel favours him [Leanne's transgender brother] ... I feel like they just sort of are, I don't know if it's closer, because they spend different times together in the doctor's office and stuff. I don't really know what it is, but at times, she definitely favours him. I can see it and I feel it... [S]he might have more interest on the things that he's dealing with than me, because I'm *regular*, I guess. And so, the problems he has are very different, like changing his name, or changing his whole body or whatever. And mine are the regular girl problems or whatever. So, I have a feeling that might be why, but I'm not really sure. (Leanne)

Two participants described an enhanced sense of independence, at least partially attributed to having received less relative attention from their parents for some period.

...[A]fter Keith just came out, it was sort of like my mom's thoughts were constantly on that [the transition]. That might be why I had to be so strong, is because there was no one really. She was so busy, and my dad was having his own personal struggle, that it was like I had to just be strong for myself... I guess those intertwine a little... (Dani)

Nevertheless, three individuals highlighted that parental attention had leveled out since the onset of their sibling's transition (as discussed in section 4.5.6 below). For example, Dani reported that her brother's transition gradually became a less central feature of her mother's everyday life.

[A]fter a while it sort of calmed down. I think now she's like an expert. And it's just like second nature for her to know what to do, and for her to help people. And she's back to her regular self, which is nice because sometimes I need support too.

Similarly, during the member check, Leanne stated her mother is no longer as intensely involved in the transition as she used to be, and that Leanne no longer experiences her mother's attention as unevenly weighted toward their trans family member.

When asked if they had any advice to share with parents of trans folk, Dani and Leanne both highlighted the importance of continuing to support one's cisgender children through the transition process.

[D]on't neglect your kids who aren't transitioning... They still need you. Even though they might not show it, or they might be strong, they still need you to check in with them, right? And just, continue parenting... Stay part of their lives... (Dani)

... [I]t's just checking in [with the cisgender child] and seeing how they are at the beginning of it. And if they say, "Well, I'm hesitant about," "I'm nervous," "I'm frustrated," then getting them to talk to someone... It could be your mum, or even the transgender [family member] ... or a counsellor, or maybe the doctors... Just listening to them too. If they are fine with it, then just leave them alone... [W]hen the transgender sibling [takes] the next step, maybe checking in on them again, saying "How do you feel about this?" ... [I]f they're [parents are] actually interested, and they're not just saying it... and they really do care about how [their cisgender child] feel[s], then if they are feeling a certain way, whether it's about the transition or school-related or friend-related or household-related, then the parents would be willing to help and will be interested in helping. (Leanne)

Overlapping with a sense of parental attention to their trans siblings, six participants (55%) described some degree of constricted communication of their own emotional experiences due to their family's spotlight attention on their sibling's trans identity and transition. For example, during the member check, Maxine stated that she “didn’t talk a lot” with her parents about what she was feeling during the period in which her brother, Eddie, began transitioning. Maxine explained in writing, “At this time my dad was still drinking and my mom had so much on her plate, I didn’t feel what I had to say was important enough.” Maxine added that, at the time, she did not express her feelings to her peers at school due to her lack of trust in them.

### ***Discussion of subtheme***

The belief that one’s parent(s) had, at some point, provided their trans children with disproportionate attention was described as a modest personal challenge associated with a sibling’s transition. In one qualitative finding, the mother of young cis and trans children indicated in her journal that her cisgender son “rarely gets a moment alone with mom” (Barron & Capous-Desyllas, 2017, p. 23). Brill and Pepper (2008) similarly suggest that siblings of trans individuals may feel “second best” in relation to their trans sibling. Even in the current sample of cisgender individuals who mostly characterized their families as supportive, participants frequently related to the sense that parents had at some point directed their attention toward the trans sibling and away from themselves.

In many ways the phenomenon of transgender identity is disparate from that of disability. Minding their differences, both phenomena are associated with common experiences by one’s parents (and perhaps one’s other family members) who are faced with the responsibilities of navigating institutional (e.g., school) policies, medical services, and social supports. Similarly, parents and other family members of individuals who are trans or have disabilities are commonly faced with the task of confronting social stigma. In lieu of the paucity of research examining the experience of siblings of trans individuals, there is a large and growing body of literature examining the psychosocial experiences of siblings of children and youth with serious mental illnesses, developmental disabilities (DD), including intellectual disability, autism spectrum disorder, and Down syndrome. Multiple studies (e.g., Corter, Pepler, Stanhope, & Abramovitch, 1992; Lobato, Miller, Barbour, Hall, & Pezzullo, 1991; McHale & Gamble,

1989) have showed that parents pay more attention to their children with developmental disabilities than to their typically-developing children, which may cause typically-developing siblings some distress or a sense of unfairness (e.g., McHale & Gamble, 1989). Abrams (2009) has published on her clinical experiences of working with siblings of individuals with mental illnesses. Her writings include the impression that some of the “well” siblings she had worked with tend to feel neglected by their parents. In one example, the more typically-developing sibling developed symptoms of anxiety and school phobia. It was Abrams’s impression that these youth developed symptoms because there was no other way for her mother to attend to, or express empathy, for her situation. Abrams provided another case example in which the “well” sibling was careful not to cause her parents further worry. The sibling would not share with her parents anything that they might find troubling.

In sum, the unequal distribution of parental attention toward one child may contribute to emotional difficulties or some sense of neglect in another child. These findings have been demonstrated across families of children with diverse types of needs. Katz and Nelson (2007) found that perceived unfairness of family roles tends to exacerbate emotional difficulties associated with family stress. It is thus important that parents carefully distribute their time and attention toward each their children so that none feel left behind, especially during a TGN child’s gender consolidation and/or transition.

#### **4.5.4. Role of intermediary between parents and trans sibling**

Six participants (55%) reported that at least one of their parents sought information and/or emotional support from them regarding their sibling’s gender identity, gender expression, and/or wellbeing either prior to or following their gender identity disclosure. As a result, these participants experienced a role imposed on them as an intermediary or “middle” person between their parents and transgender siblings. Participants tended to experience this new or enhanced role as stressful, frustrating, and/or disrespectful to their trans sibling.

Several of these participants described experiences in which their parents, concerned for the wellbeing of their trans children, requested that their cisgender children talk to their trans siblings on behalf of their parent/s.

I think [my mother] comes to me quite a lot for support... I have been a middle-man though. There's some things that I can relate to with Eddie better than my parents can... They would ask me to talk to Eddie about the bullying and stuff, and try and make him feel better, that it was gonna get better and those kids suck but the world isn't like that... It did feel stressful when I was trying my hardest and Eddie wasn't accepting my help, which happened a lot during the early stages of the transition and prior to the transition... [H]e would half-listen but not really say anything in response. So not getting back the response I was wanting was stressful and frustrating... I wanted to know that he was listening and what I was saying was true, I guess... (Maxine)

Shiloh will sometimes shut people out... And then that will make my dad be more worried. And then he'll text me and then be like, "Will you talk to Shiloh?" ... [M]y parents would call me up and be like, "Can you come over and talk to Shiloh? He won't come out of his room." ... And what are you gonna do? Like, who else is there?... I've always been the person in my family who I think Shiloh feels emotionally closest to. And then, definitely during the transition, it was exaggerated. Also because, I think because I'm queer, and so there was perception that I somehow understood more. And I think also the perception from Shiloh that I understood more... (Quinn)

Quinn added that she often responded to such requests by "redirect[ing her] family to ask Shiloh" about his own experience rather than approaching Quinn about him: "I've asked family members to talk less to me *about* Shiloh and more *to* Shiloh."

Lukas shared that he served as a source of information, support, and validation to his mother while she adjusted to her trans child's gender identity.

[S]he'd just sort of come down and find a way to talk about it, just weaving it into conversation... [V]ia some train of questions, she would come to the question that I knew she already wanted to ask... So, whenever my mom needed to vent, she'd normally come to me, because my father didn't really care too much... It was sort of her asking, "What does it mean [to be transgender]? I don't understand what it's like." ... And I had no clue. At that point I barely knew what it was. So, she was doing all the research and she would talk about the research that she had. And I would sort of give my opinions about it and say, "Okay, I think that it's just a psychological thing, sort of no different than sexuality." ...

Lukas added that his mother asked him questions which she would have felt uncomfortable directing to her transgender child.

I'd say it gave her a place to just sort of ask the questions that she was really asking that would probably sound rude to ask my brother... Like, "Why do you feel transgender?" That's also a very harsh question to ask somebody... That's the way that I understand it.

Several participants described the uncomfortable burden of having to choose what of their sibling's personal information to disclose and what to conceal. Vanessa shared how she navigated her parents' requests for information about her sibling's sexual identity prior to their coming out as gender nonbinary.

My parents would ask me if Blake was a lesbian or if they were in a relationship. I had no idea at the time. I wasn't about to ask either. I just feel like it shouldn't be necessary unless they bring it up.

Phoebe described feeling frustrated by her mother's lack of receptiveness after seeking advice from Phoebe about her trans sibling, Peyton.

... [M]ostly it's just frustrating when I tell her [Phoebe's mother] what I think and then she just doesn't really believe me... Sometimes she'll ask for my advice about some issues to do with gender that she's struggling with in her head. And then I'll tell her my advice and she's like, "Yeah, okay, whatever." And then I'm like, "Well why'd you ask for my advice if you didn't really want to know?" And maybe she did want to know. Maybe she's thinking about it later in her own head and maybe she's been contemplating what I've been saying all day. But in the moment it's definitely very frustrating when she's not really listening to me, but she also wants to know; wants to hear.

A few of the participants indicated that their siblings had similarly asked them to relay information to their parents or other family members. For example, Quinn shared that her trans brother Shiloh asked Quinn to "come out" to their older sister on his behalf.

Overall, participants seemed to react to the imposed role of the family intermediary with feelings of discomfort, avoidance, stress, and frustration.

### ***Discussion of subtheme***

While participants in the current study emphasized that their dyadic relationships with both parents and siblings remained relatively stable overall, over half of those interviewed shared the experience of a new or exaggerated role of the intermediary between parents and their trans sibling. Participants reported that this role was largely imposed upon them by their parents, rather than by their trans sibling. This subtheme is corroborated by a similar finding from Huang et al.'s (2016) qualitative investigation of siblings of lesbian and gay individuals. The authors described the experience of one participant who indicated his frustration regarding his family members' ongoing discussions with him about his sister's sexual orientation and gender expression, sharing that he wished his mother and grandmother would "stop like going back to it and talk

about something else” (p. 154). Findings from the current study emphasized a common sense of responsibility experienced by cis siblings to check on their sibling’s wellbeing and to provide their parents with updates.

The sense of responsibility to take part in the provision of care for one’s trans sibling on behalf of a parent represents a second type of parentification task imposed upon study participants. This issue of children in the family taking on parental roles is discussed above, in the context of participants in the current study who felt that they had adopted roles as protectors of their younger trans siblings (as described in section 4.4.3). This previous theme of sibling protection emerged through participants’ own concerns for their siblings’ wellbeing. In the case of the current subtheme, participants are explicitly told or asked to provide emotional support to one’s parent as well as their trans sibling. Literature suggests that young adults with higher quality relationships with their parents are more likely to feel obligated to provide emotional support to their parents (Cheng, Birditt, Zarit, & Fingerman, 2013; Guan & Fuligni, 2015). This finding is consistent with the close relationships between most family members represented in the current study. Empirical findings also suggest that when parentification takes the form of temporary emotional support with an adjustment, it may be better tolerated and less consequential for the parentified child (Jankowski, Hooper, Sandage, & Hannah, 2011). Nevertheless, a cis child’s role in family communications between parents and the trans child should be considered with sensitivity by other family members.

#### **4.5.5. Adjustment to a family member’s transition as one factor contributing to accumulated stress within the family among select participants**

Three participants (27%) described their experiences of their siblings’ gender transitions as one family event amongst several contributing to stress and adjustment by the immediate family. For example, Quinn described her brother’s gender transition as one of several interpersonal and historic challenges for her immediate family.

I know at different points, people in my life, friends, have been like, “Your family is so fuckin’ intense.” I remember my best friend... was like, “Everybody’s family has one thing, but you guys have like five.”

Maxine suggested that Eddie’s stress and emotional difficulties secondary to gender dysphoria contributed to other family problems in ways unbeknownst to her at the time.

For a period of about three years maybe, my dad... was heavily, heavily using [alcohol] during that period... So it was just a very hard time in the household. And then, for Eddie at school, it being so hard, I think everything just sort of piled on. So that was probably the roughest period in our family history.

As mentioned above, Lukas shared that his sibling sustained a head injury just prior to coming out as a boy. He viewed his family was more stable prior to these events and discussed his family's adjustment to a sense of perpetual change and instability, which he characterized as the "transition to transition."

I think there was so much going on in such a period of time, it was just, *okay, it's just another thing that's happening.* ... Now everything is just sort of unstable... I don't think about it much. I guess it's just sort of something I've become used to... I don't know what's going to happen if something's new—And something *is* going to pop up tomorrow. That's just the way that it is.

This is a quote from a William Gibson novel. [The concept] is... we don't have the same future that our grandparents had... The quote is, "Fully imagined futures are a luxury of another day." I don't know what the future holds... I don't really have a vision for what my family looks like in the future... And with that, I guess it's sort of like, I don't make predictions about that.

### ***Discussion of subtheme***

A review of the current empirical body of literature did not yield any previous publications on cumulative stress in the context of the families of trans people. In family life more generally, the accumulation of environmental stressors or risk factors is associated with mental health problems (Buehler & Gerard, 2013; Copeland, Shanahan, Costello, & Angold, 2009). In a longitudinal study, Buehler and Gerard (2013) found that the number of family risk factors (i.e., socioeconomic, parents' psychological, marital, and parenting domains) was related to adjustment difficulties in early adolescence, including increased academic difficulties and externalizing problems (i.e., aggression, hyperactivity, disobedience, etc.) . This finding suggests a correlation between the sheer number of stressors present for an individual and their degree of psychological/psychosocial functioning. Nearly a third of the current study's participants described their sibling's transition as one of several stressors affecting their family. To this extent, it may be that the specific characteristics of a family member's transition may not uniquely contribute to family stress. Instead, akin to other major life adjustments, a family's adjustment to a member's gender transition may "stretch" a family's social and

emotional resources, particularly when a family is burdened by the presence of other stressors. The presence of stress on the family may at times contribute to the development of new adversities, reducing a family's capacity to effectively manage pre-existing stressors, and ultimately contributing to the net accumulation of stress experienced by the family unit.

In addition, a family member's transition is inherently associated with a host of uncertainties, including its impact on the trans individual and their life outside of the family, ability to access desired supports and interventions, and the reactions of others in the extended family or community. Research suggests that uncertainty about a possible future threat is a major contributor to anxiety and emotional distress (see review by Grupe & Nitschke, 2013). Further, perceived uncertainty in the context of family life is associated with depressive symptoms; however, this effect is moderated by problem-focused coping as well as distancing from demands (Pinquart & Silbereisen, 2008). This previous research on the relationship between uncertainty and psychological distress suggests the possibility that uncertainty and the associated sense of stability associated with a sibling's transition may at least partially account for its contribution to the perceived accumulation of stress experienced by one's family. It is important to note that this subtheme was only represented in the interviews of three of 11 participants; in fact, a greater number of study participants discussed their family's return to homeostasis over time following their adjustment to a family member's transition, as discussed directly below.

#### **4.5.6. Gradual re-establishment of homeostasis within family**

Four participants (36%) disclosed that, despite past periods in which their sibling's transition was a central event within their families, the transition gradually required less urgent attention by their parents. Their family environments returned gradually to a state of overall stability. Some participants, such as Quinn, described their own process of returning to a state of stability following her brother Shiloh's transition. Quinn described this as a more central aspect of her life "in the early days" of her brother's transition, which had become less central as her brother became more "stable."

It was, for an extended period of time, a very, very major, difficult thing I was experiencing... I take it less personally now and have more distance now that Shiloh's more stable.

Phoebe emphasized that Peyton's transition was gradual and ongoing at the time of the interview, reminiscent of Phoebe's own recovery from an eating disorder.

... It's not a family celebration. It's more just family relief like, *'The problem is gone.'* There was never any... *Hooray! Phoebe's got over her eating disorder... We can finally have this moment of peace without fricken everyone having panic attacks all the time.* And I don't think there's going to be that with Peyton either. I don't think there's going to be any moment where we're all just like, *hey, everything's better now.* It's not as black-and-white as that. And I wrote a piece of writing when I was recovering... There was a quote from it that I've always remembered, and it's, "Recovery is a process of the bad days slowly getting further apart, to where you can't remember when the last time you had a bad day was."

Some participants described the re-distribution of parental attention (see section 4.5.3 above) as a component of their family's return to homeostasis. As Quinn concisely stated, "I think that now my mum is more settled into just living her life like it [the transition] isn't the centre of her life."

### ***Discussion of subtheme***

Over a third of the participants in the current study described the re-establishment of family equilibrium following a temporary period of instability. Importantly, seven participants (64%) did not explicitly describe this theme or its antithesis (i.e., ongoing family conflict or instability resulting from the transition). Although we cannot infer the overall proportion of participants who would have endorsed or opposed this subtheme, it is clear that the family's eventual return to homeostasis did represent a salient aspect of the experience of a sibling's transition for at least four of 11 participants (36%). Kim and Rose (2014) define family homeostasis as "the capacity and mechanisms by which equilibrium is re-established in the family after a change occurs" (p. 2450). According to Patterson (1998), if a change in the family is evaluated by the family as manageable, it will not disturb the family equilibrium; if evaluated as intolerable, it will lead to crisis for the family.

As mentioned above, six participants (55%) believed that their family dynamics remained predominantly unchanged by their sibling's trans identity and transition. It is likely that a family's evaluation of the transition as manageable may precipitate such adaptive coping within the family. Perhaps when a family holds the attitude that they will be able to manage and cope with the transition process, they may not reflect back on

the experience with the impression that their family was drastically changed in any way. In other words, if the transition process is relatively smooth, the gradual adjustments made by the family may be less salient for the individual than the family's return to homeostasis itself.

Perhaps a family's ability to cope with challenges associated with a transition improves with time, experience, and the development of new perspectives and coping skills across each individual family member.

#### **4.6. Mostly but not entirely positive peer relations and interactions in regard to having a trans sibling**

Nine participants (82%) reported that they had communicated with their peers about their sibling's trans identity. All nine participants reported that most or all of their peers responded to this information with acceptance.

... [T]hey were all very accepting also. And they were happy for him too. Because that's the kind of people that I'm friends with. It's non-judgmental people, and I think that's important. (Dani)

At one point there was like [an ice-breaker at school]. "Tell us something interesting about yourself." And I thought Jacob being transgender was very interesting... So I would say, "My brother was a girl and now he's a boy." ... And a lot of people thought that was cool. So there wasn't really any negative feedback from anybody or anything. (Iris)

Everyone that I've told, everyone that my mother has told, everyone that beyond that is, "Oh, cool. Good for you." ... [I]t's just acceptance, move on. And I'm like, "Oh, okay. Perfect." I couldn't have hoped for better... I was expecting other people to respond the way that I did... *What does it mean?* I guess now because it's somewhat commonplace that it's, "Oh, okay." [*gestured "thumbs up"*] (Lukas)

Of note, one of these nine participants, Maxine stated that she had only told two people about her brother Eddie's transition.

I've actually only told like two people about Eddie in-depth, and the fact that he's trans... to this date. So that's just like a personal thing. I'm very private and kind of have trust issues.

Of the two participants who did not describe this theme, one reported that they had not had any communication with their peers regarding their sibling's transition.

Another participant did not describe reactions from her primary peer group during the interview and did not take part in a member check.

Four participants (36%) described prior feelings of self-consciousness and fear related to negative judgments by peers regarding their sibling's trans identity. However, most of these individuals described reduced anxiety and increased self-confidence with exposure.

I feel somehow confidence and judgment go together. And I feel like I've just become more confident in myself to tell people [about my brother's transition] and just brush it off my shoulders if they don't like it. And so, I feel like those two go together. (Leanne)

In contrast to predominant experiences of peer acceptance, three participants (27%; including those who indicated acceptance by most of their peers) did describe one or more negative responses from select peers. Only one participant (Leanne) described rejection by one friend with whom she was not particularly close, after having disclosed that her brother is transgender.

... [I]t's never really affected me, him being transgender, but it's people's judgments on my family... I have lost friends because they don't support it... [A previous friend] said that, "Leanne's family is just a little too weird for me. I don't want to be around her anymore." And so I lost her. She still goes to my school now, but we just don't talk... It just doesn't make sense to me how someone can't be friends with a person because of their brother's decision, or how their brother feels inside... (Leanne)

Another one participant (Lukas) stated that he experienced transphobic and derogatory remarks (e.g., referring to his brother as a "tranny") by seven classmates.

I'm not going to judge them on this... I'm going to be the bigger man 'cause it's the right thing to do. It's a matter of saying, *what does it say about you?* I'm not going to treat you any differently because you do this... But you're going to choose what you do from here.

Lukas stated that when he feels others' questions or comments from others to be acceptable and non-intrusive, he responds honestly and factually to his best ability. In contrast, when he deemed others' comments or questions to be inappropriate or intrusive, he took the following approach:

If somebody comes and attacks me for [having a trans sibling], I'm going to say...A lot of people would come up to be and say, "Hey, your

sister's a tranny." And I'm like, "Okay. Come over here for a sec. What does you saying that say about you?" ... That's how I responded every time... [T]here was a time when I was a judgmental person, and I asked myself that same question.

Celeste described subtler experiences of invalidation from her peers resulting from their intentional misgendering (e.g., use of incorrect pronouns) of her trans sister, Nico. Celeste described her peers' misgendering of Nico as misguided attempts to express solidarity with Celeste.

... [W]hen I was really having problems with my relationship with Nico, people expected me to not be as accepting [of her] just because we were fighting. And I had people who would use male pronouns for Nico around me, especially when we were fighting, and I would have to stop and go, *okay, I might be mad, but it's still not my place to disrespect her gender* ... And now my friends all use female pronouns for Nico. But certainly, it felt like going an extra step to just be like, "I know I'm mad and I know you're trying to be loyal to me, but we're gonna have to respect her wishes on this." 'Cause it's a really dick move to not, just because you're angry.

### ***Discussion of theme***

The function of peer support for siblings of individuals with unique needs has been discussed in previous literature exploring the experiences of other populations. For example, in Callio and Gustafsson's (2016) aforementioned qualitative study on siblings of individuals with eating disorders, several participants described the importance of having friends with whom they could discuss their sister's illness. The current findings further highlight the importance of peer acceptance for siblings of other individuals facing stigma or psychosocial difficulties.

Participants' perceptions of their peers' responses to their having a trans sibling may be interpreted in the context of previously described study findings. Over a third of the participants described prior self-consciousness and/or worry about their peers learning that their sibling is trans. Despite their worry and concern, all participants who discussed their sibling's trans identity with their peers stated that most or all peers did in fact respond with support and acceptance. These findings offer a message of hope to other young individuals (at least those from supportive families and/or communities) with transgender and nonbinary siblings. Less optimistically, three participants stated that they had also encountered some form(s) of peer invalidation, ridicule, and even

rejection. Nevertheless, all of these individuals who described some form of negative peer reactions also shared tactful and effective strategies for managing such reactions.

In sum, these results suggest that disclosures of a sibling's trans identity to a cis person's friends and acquaintances is associated with the real threat of negative peer reactions, ranging from subtle invalidation to rejection. Study participants resided in and around moderate to large urban centres in Canada, likely representing a protective factor against overt displays of transphobia or violence in response to learning of a participant's sibling's trans identity. Further, the current participant sample is likely biased, given that each participant was willing to openly disclose their personal experiences during their in-depth interview. Bullying or other significantly negative reactions from peers due to having a trans sibling would potentially prohibit individuals from engaging voluntarily in a research interview about their adverse experiences.

#### **4.7. Challenging interactions with extended family members and others**

Five participants (46%) reported challenging experiences relating to a lack of understanding and acceptance of one's transgender sibling by one or more extended family member.

What bothers me the most is their questions are just to understand it and get their head wrapped around it, and I don't really think that's necessary for us to have to do for them... [S]ometimes they can be offensive. Like, they'll ask me if Blake's depressed or going through a hard time or if it's a phase. And it just pisses me off... [T]hat information, even if it's true, doesn't need to be shared with them... [M]y personal opinion is if you really care and want to be educated, asking the internet would be a lot more useful because it's your own time... [I]f you really care and want to support, I feel like investing personally and using your own resources rather than kind of nagging the [immediate] family who's just accepted [their family member as trans] ... To me, it's just kind of, accept it and move on or don't, in a way. (Vanessa)

My grandma, one of them, she just refused to acknowledge that [my brother] is a man. And kept doing it on purpose... [S]he kept saying "she" after my mom would correct her and say, "he, him, he," and she kept saying it wrong. I didn't want to interfere or interject or anything because I didn't want to make her angry. But I would sit there and I would just think to myself, *how can you keep doing this when you know? You know that it makes him upset when people do that purposely...* It could have just been that it was so foreign to her. But yeah, it made me

upset for Keith... through the coming out and stuff, people just learning about their new identities. It made me nervous for him that people weren't gonna accept him. (Dani)

Additionally, five participants (46%) reported challenging confrontations by others in the community, including strangers. Mia described witnessing social discrimination directed toward her young (eight-to-10-year-old) transgender sister beginning prior to her transition, when she presented as gender-nonconforming.

But before being transgender, just not conforming with either was definitely harder just because the discrimination was much more prevalent and ongoing. And people would get pretty nasty... Even at Costco, kids would point, and parents would point. It's like, okay, I get when a kid does it. Kids are naive. They're young, they don't know, it's in their nature. But for an adult to do that, it's pretty hard to see, because that adult clearly isn't going to stop their child.

... [A] lot of people would always be like... "Why does she wear dresses?" "Is she a boy or a girl?" ... [A]t the time I would say, "She is a boy, but she just dresses like that 'cause she wants to." And I think that now, the response is, "It's none of your business." ... But back then I was young; I didn't know what an appropriate response should be, so I just told the truth... [P]eople should never ask anyone whether they identify as male or female or anything in-between... Oh and, gosh, I've been asked if she's had *the* surgery. I'm like, *she's [eight to 10 years old]. Like, really?!* ... I just say, "No, she's a child. You can't get *the* surgery until you're like 18."

Four participants described feeling frustrated, irritated, and/or angry in response to others' questions about their sibling's gender identity, and their lack of understanding or acceptance of trans issues more generally. Phoebe expressed frustration in response to others' lack of understanding regarding gender-neutral pronouns.

... [S]ometimes they don't [switch pronouns during the conversation] at all... And I don't know if their brain is erasing the fact that I'm using "they/them" pronouns just 'cause they just can't quite understand it, but they'll continue using the wrong pronouns... And it's just kind of frustrating when people just bring that up over and over again, and when they're kind of confused, and I have to explain it *again*... I wish people could just get over it and then move on.

Similarly, Vanessa shared her sense of frustration in response to others' questioning about her past use of the gender-neutral term "sibling" in singular form. She shared that her gender nonbinary brother, Blake, had initially asked that she refer to them as her "sibling." However, Vanessa felt "awkward" about using this label as she believed that the use of the term "sibling" invited unnecessary questions about Blake's gender identity

and about Vanessa's personal life. Therefore, and so she switched to the term "brother" with Blake's permission.

It just kind of isn't seen as very ordinary yet. And so people are like, "Wait, 'sibling?' How many do you have?" ...And then they'll ask questions that just veer off into one subject. And it's the repetition that I was like, "I don't need to talk about that right now. I just have a brother or a sibling." Yeah. It's like, *move on* kind of thing... It's just the uncommonness that everyone is taken aback by...

Dani also described feeling frustrated by other's intrusive and ignorant questions, especially when they do not know her well. Similar to Vanessa, Dani shared the belief that others have a responsibility to do their own research: "When people are really curious about something that is private or personal, google it." Dani related this to the principal of "treat[ing] others how you want to be treated." Some participants who reported this theme emphasized that these unpleasant confrontations represent the only significant situation prompting frustration of all their experiences related to having a trans sibling.

### ***Discussion of theme***

Participants described irritation, frustration, and anger in response to confrontations by extended family members and other community members regarding a sibling's trans identity or gender transition. Frustration, irritation, and anger were likely experienced in reaction to: (a) others' dissent toward a sibling's gender identity and/or expression; and, (b) the participant's impression that comments and questions from others have been inappropriately addressed to the cis participant in the absence of their trans sibling, the subject of discussion. These adverse emotional responses contrast with participants' consensus (i.e., indicated by 100% of participants) that their trans sibling has a right to autonomy and information privacy (see section 4.4.2).

Despite the salience of this theme, cisgender siblings' experiences with others in regard to having a trans sibling have not been previously investigated. Nevertheless, parents of trans children have previously shared comparable frustrations associated with others' misunderstandings of trans people within the community (e.g., Johnson & Benson, 2014; Capous-Desyllas & Barron, 2017).

From the current findings, it appears that cisgender siblings often feel a sense of duty to share knowledge pertaining to their trans sibling by responding to others'

questions, comments, and even dissention. Unfortunately, this responsibility of knowledge-sharing is imposed on the cis sibling, often unfavourably. Sharek, Huntley-Moore, and McCann (2018) proposed a model for the stages in the lives of families of young trans people. In this model, a family's access to trans information is then transmitted to the wider family, professionals, and then the broader community and society. This proposed model of knowledge transmission is consistent with Bronfenbrenner's previously discussed concept of ecological transition, through which young people play a role in the permeation of knowledge from their trans sibling to their larger families and communities. This model of knowledge transmission may help cis siblings to reframe the task of responding to challenging questions and comments from others. Instead of experiencing this task as burdensome, an individual may view these this as opportunity to share information with the wider community, as an ally of trans individuals.

## **4.8. Social beliefs, perceptions, and actions as influenced by having a trans sibling**

Most participants shared their impressions of the changing social attitudes toward trans folk. Seven participants (64%) described a current growth of trans visibility and acceptance. Five participants (46%) advocated for more education about gender diversity. Four (36%) described their intentional use of gender-inclusive language in support of their siblings and other trans and nonbinary folk. Lastly, three participants (27%) shared the belief that there are not enough resources, including social supports, for trans individuals and their families.

### **4.8.1. Impressions of growing trans visibility and acceptance**

Seven participants (64%) described the opinion that their generation is more accepting of trans people as a result of the current social climate in which trans visibility and inclusion have progressed. Quinn related this change in social climate to her expectation that siblings of transgender young adults would generally be more knowledgeable and accepting of their sibling as transgender than their parents.

... [P]olitically, just kind of where we are now... your siblings are much more likely to be politically progressive, or non-reactive to being trans,

than your parents, 'cause your parents will probably—just because of their generation—have more prejudices, or not have information.

Dani suggested that the current social climate within Canada has likely contributed to her own ease with respect to her brother's transgender identity.

For some reason, this stuff didn't really phase me. I think it might be the generation we live in, that it's, it's like the norm to just be really accepting of everyone, especially in Canada. We are not the States—oh my god...

Likewise, Phoebe attributed differences in her and her mother's divergent understandings of gender to the changing social climate regarding gender diversity.

I feel like my generation is standing on the brink of a complete shift about what gender means... And I've heard this from every generation... They say, "Your generation is further along than we have ever been." And I think that's really important. And I think my mom needs to realize that... I think that she does intellectually, but emotionally, I think she still is struggling with a lot of ideas surrounding gender.

Celeste cautioned that the trend toward acceptance of trans individuals is recent, which she related to her impression that her transgender sister may continue to fear aspects of openly identifying as transgender.

[I]t doesn't feel like a huge thing anymore, but... It might still feel really scary for her... [W]e're just moving on from the old worldview. In some ways, it feels like some things are just starting to be really open, where as in some cases, it's been open for a long time.

Maxine similarly remarked on the recency of the movement toward trans acceptance. She described her mother's lack of social awareness of trans issues at the time of her brother's transition in the context of the newness of trans-related knowledge.

My mom was actually telling me the other day that she was feeling guilty that she didn't explore being trans earlier with Eddie. And I sort of reassured her by saying, "Being trans is still really new." I think my generation is the first where young kids are being accepted as trans. And the fact that my brother is able to transition at 14—Like, that's still pretty good... She felt guilty that she hadn't realized Eddie *could* be transgender earlier. And if she had thought about it earlier, if Eddie had been able to transition earlier, maybe it would have spared him all of this stress that was associated with his school life prior to the transition... I don't think she can blame herself for just not having information... Eddie also had emotion regulation issues, so we were seeing a lot of doctors

for that. No one ever mentioned anything about being transgender. That was all my mom researching things and figuring things out herself.

### ***Discussion of subtheme***

All participants in the current study were born between 1980 and 2005 and thus presumably witnessed the movement toward increased visibility and rights of LGBTQ+ individuals, and gender-variant folk specifically. As mentioned above (see section 4.4.6), five participants reported that they were members of their school's GSA. With an increased societal consciousness of gender diversity, more individuals have the necessary knowledge to reflect on, and perhaps question, their assigned and experienced gender (Bouman, de Vries, & T'Sjoen, 2016). Our growing social recognition of the rights of trans and gender-diverse individuals is reflected by changes to Canadian legislation. In May 2016, the Canadian government introduced *Bill C-16: An Act to amend the Canadian Human Rights Act and the Criminal Code* (2017, c 13), passed by the Senate in June 2017. This bill granted equal rights and protection for trans people by prohibiting gender identity and gender expression as grounds of discrimination. Given the recency of social changes for TGN individuals, most participants in the current study described themselves as more accepting of their sibling's TGN identity, and of gender diversity more generally, than their parents.

Participants frequently compared their adjustment to their sibling's transition with the adjustment of their parents, indicating that their own adjustment process was easier. In keeping with this discrepancy, some participants compared their own values and worldviews to those of their parents, commonly describing a society that is more accepting of trans and LGBTQ+ individuals than it had been over previous decades and generations. Overall, participants suggested a *cohort effect* toward increased trans awareness and inclusion. As discussed by Swindler (2001), the process of making meaning from a life experience—including a family member's gender transition—is informed by the cultural milieu of the time. In LGBTQ+ research, *social climate* has been operationalized as an index that included anti-discrimination policies, proportion of public high schools with gay-straight alliance groups, and public opinion (see Perez-Brumer, Hatzenbuehler, Oldenburg, & Bockting, 2015). It is thus unsurprising that today's parents of adolescents may have more difficulty looking beyond the gender binary than their children, who came of age during our moral shift toward gender inclusivity. Further, our current age of information technology allows for rapid access and transmission of trans-

related education, even when face-to-face social environments are restrictive. Social reinforcement for gender-inclusive self-positioning may create barriers to a cis child's understanding and empathy for a parent's experience of confusion, fear, resistance, and/or grief in response to the family member's trans identity. Participants' perceptions of the cohort effect remind us that one's responses to a loved one's trans transition are situated within an evolving sociocultural context.

#### **4.8.2. Importance of trans education**

Five participants (46%) relayed the importance of trans-affirmative education as well as LGBTQ+ education, more generally. As Leanne stated, "I think it's important to let people know it's normal and healthy being transgender." Some participants suggested that the internet be utilized as a resource to learn about transgender issues.

Celeste advised other siblings of trans individuals to educate themselves about what it means to identify as a gender or sexual minority. She stated that improved knowledge would allow these individuals to better support the identity development of their transgender siblings and of themselves.

I think learning about the queer community as a whole is a really good perspective to have. It's useful to know that people feel so many different ways and that every single one of them is valid, including the way *you* feel.

Maxine expressed the standpoint that trans identities are "natural" and are at least partially predetermined. She thus shared the perspective that others should have no reason to reject one's trans identity or gender transition.

... I want people to also believe in it and understand that being trans is natural for some people and they shouldn't be shamed for feeling what feel, because they literally have no choice; it's their brain telling them. You're the one who's forcing them to go against what they believe in.

#### ***Discussion of subtheme***

These findings may be conceptualized as an extension of the subtheme described above (see section 4.2.4) in which nine participants (82%) indicated that they experienced an increased sense of knowledge and understanding of what it means to be trans as a result of their sibling's trans identity. The current subtheme of "the importance of trans education" uniquely demonstrates that participants not only gained knowledge of

gender diversity by having a trans sibling, but often felt it important to advocate for an increased understanding of trans identities and gender diversity by society.

The prevailing lack of understanding of gender and sexual diversity in society is well-documented. Further, lack of knowledge by the general public and lack of competencies among educators regarding LGBTQ+ issues are likely mutually reinforcing. For example, Quinn and Meiners (2011) found that 57% of pre-service teachers were unprepared to work effectively with gender and sexual minority youth. Such research suggests a need for increased efforts to inform society about gender diversity, which may begin with the formal education of educators themselves, so that they are equipped to provide support to gender-nonconforming and trans students.

Some participants in the current study recommended that peers and extended family members who want to learn about gender diversity do this research on their own. Green (2010) highlighted the utility of online resources in addressing specific questions related to being trans. The internet offers a growing plethora of local and global resources to support gender-nonconforming, gender-questioning, and trans individuals, which may also be accessed by family members and other individuals seeking information about what it means to be trans. Introductions to gender diversity are provided by organizations such as Trans Student Educational Resources, whose website includes a detailed glossary of terms relevant to the trans community (see <http://www.transstudent.org/about/definitions>), the Gay & Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation (GLAAD) “Transgender FAQ” (see <https://www.glaad.org/transgender/transfaq>), and many others. Trans PULSE, a community-based research project, has conducted research intended to better support trans communities in Ontario. Trans PULSE has also published a resource list for trans and transitioned individuals across Canada, last updated in October 2013 (see [http://transpulseproject.ca/wp-content/uploads/2013/10/Trans\\_PULSE\\_Resource\\_List\\_FINAL.pdf](http://transpulseproject.ca/wp-content/uploads/2013/10/Trans_PULSE_Resource_List_FINAL.pdf)). Content designed to support parents and families of trans individuals has become increasingly available. Within Canada, the most comprehensive of these resources to date is “Families in TRANSition: A Resource Guide for Parents of Trans Youth: 2<sup>nd</sup> edition” published by Central Toronto Youth Services (available for free download from <http://www.ctys.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/03/CTYS-FIT-Families-in-Transition-Guide-2nd-edition.pdf>).

In consideration of the current study's findings and corroborative literature, the importance of trans education is well-established and may be improved through the personal use of widely-accessible resource tools such as the internet. Trans education may also be facilitated through formal and informal education systems. Knowledge transmission will likely be improved once educators are themselves competent to address gender diversity in the classroom and other learning spaces.

### **4.8.3. Challenging or rejecting the assumed gender binary**

Four participants (36%) indicated that they have questioned or decidedly rejected the gender binary system as a result of experiencing a sibling's gender transition. Maxine discussed a change in her gender beliefs. However, she admitted that it is difficult for her to implement these changes, such as gender-neutral language, within the current gender-binary-dominant society.

... [B]asically my current mindset is, *the gender binary sucks*. I want to get rid of it. That change in my mindset can definitely be attributed to experiencing firsthand the struggles of someone who doesn't fit... I want to teach my brain to look at someone and assume they're gender-nonconforming—like, not assume which side of the binary they fit into just from their outward appearance because I think that's really harmful. I think the next step for me would be being more explicit about pronouns when I'm meeting someone new. I've been shy to start that... I guess I don't want other people to judge me... [T]o be the only one using gender-neutral language 100 percent is alienating. And unfortunately, I don't really want to do that-- alienating myself to that extent...

None of the study participants described any increased fidelity to the gender binary system as a result of their sibling's gender transition.

#### ***Discussion of subtheme***

This thematic finding suggests that having a trans sibling is a life experience which has the power to influence one's worldview. Rather than simply respecting the gender identifiers of their own sibling without additional personal reflection, several participants contemplated broader conceptualizations of gender and its applications within society. Once again in keeping with Bronfenbrenner's (1979, 2005, 2006) bioecological model, this subtheme exemplifies how a transition within one's microsystem has the capacity to influence one's perception of their exosystem and

macrosystem (i.e., their broader societal systems and values, as defined in section 2.1.3).

Some participants described an intentional shift toward gender-neutral language in everyday speech as a result of having a trans sibling. Rahilly (2015) uses the term *gender literacy* to refer to the process through which parents may resist the gender binary system and work toward gender inclusivity by affirming gender variance. Miller (2016) similarly recommends that educators and others adopt a *queer literacy framework* as a critical political strategy to promote gender and sexuality self-determination and inclusivity. Miller described how this framework may be applied through the following actions: refraining from presuming heterosexuality or ascribing gender; coming to understand gender as a construct influenced by intersecting factors; challenging gender norms and gender stereotypes; and, supporting others to self-define and reject their chosen or preferred gender, sexual orientation, names, and pronouns.

Several participants shared that their improved knowledge of gender diversity (see section 4.2.4) influenced them to pursue further learning about trans issues and to engage with the LGBTQ+ community. Knowledge of gender diversity is arguably a necessary precondition to one's rejection of the gender binary system. Having witnessed firsthand a sibling's efforts to increase congruence between their assigned and affirmed gender, the current study participants arguably have deeper appreciations of gender diversity than most. Through experiential learning, several participants decided to actively modify their own views of gender and their use of gendered (or gender-neutral) language.

#### **4.8.4. Importance of social support for trans folk and their families**

Three participants (27%) expressed that trans people need access to supportive social services. Two of these participants commented on some degree of shortcoming regarding the quality and/or accessibility of services available for trans people and their families.

Luckily, my brothers had a strong support system. Not everyone's that fortunate to have people in their lives who will accept them no matter what. So, I think, for those people who are less fortunate, and-- say, their families don't want to be part of their lives anymore—It's really

important for them to have people they can rely on to, sort of, be their support. (Dani)

Quinn shared that she sought, but never found, services specifically directed to siblings of trans people: "...I actually did look if there was support for siblings, of trans people, and didn't find any."

And I think, also, different services that I'm aware will talk to family members of trans people. I don't remember that being advertised... when I looked at services... I don't remember anyone ever specifying, "Are you the sibling?" And I didn't have any real advice or guidance or any space to even debrief. I think that would have been useful.

Similarly, Maxine shared that her family's financial privileges had allowed her family to access both public and private health resources to support Eddie's trans care and the wellbeing of all family members.

I think that, if anything, our socioeconomic status has helped Eddie a lot because, I would say we're mid-to-high class [i.e., upper-middle class] ... We have enough... [I]n the early years, even before we realized Eddie was trans, I think all the mental health professionals and stuff, and the resources they were able to get for Eddie, were really great. And the fact that we had money helped a lot.

Three participants (27%) communicated that the currently available services for trans people and their families are insufficient in both quality and accessibility.

### ***General discussion of subtheme***

Only three of 11 participants (27%) conveyed the importance of support for trans individuals and their families. Nevertheless, this subtheme was judged as salient given that the current sample likely over-represents cisgender siblings from well-supported, progressive, and resourceful families (as discussed in section 5.1.1 below). Even in light of these likely protective sample characteristics, three participants commented on the shortcomings of the quality and/or accessibility of current services available to trans individuals and their families. Previously conducted focus groups of transgender parents in Toronto similarly revealed the common perspective that "[r]esources to help trans parents communicate with their partners and their children as well as resources simply to cope with their own transition were noticeably absent" (Pyne, 2012, p. 7). Taking the current findings in hand with those from Pyne's (2012) focus group, trans individuals and their families are voicing a need for improved resources to support all family members involved in the transition process.

No previous research or literature has focused on the needs of siblings of trans individuals. However, other literature on families of individuals with mental illnesses have occasionally recognized the needs of siblings. Abrams's (2009) practical guidelines on working with siblings of individuals with mental illnesses includes recommendations to help siblings to connect with other siblings, if they are interested, as a means of reducing their isolation. Abrams (2009) also suggests that mental health professionals working with individuals or families ask about both the "ill" and "well" siblings when collecting information about family functioning. From the current study findings, Abrams' (2009) recommendations are also applicable to families of trans individuals, aside from the use of "ill" and "well" identifiers in the context of cis and trans siblings. When working with siblings of trans folk in the community, the option to help facilitate connections between siblings of trans individuals should be presented by clinicians or support workers whenever possible. It is important that cisgender siblings are not left out from conversations with parents regarding their trans or nonbinary family member's transition process and the family's adjustment. In addition to supporting siblings themselves, it is possible that a sibling's recognition of their potential role in the transition process would contribute to a broader sense of family functioning and cohesion. Empirical investigations of the inclusion of siblings in family therapy and other family-oriented services have yet to be undertaken.

#### **4.9. Heterogenous perspectives on structured support for siblings of trans individuals**

The current study originally had sought to include a structured group for adolescent siblings of trans youth. This study component was designed initially in response to requests for the existence of such a service by parents involved in care at Child and Youth Mental Health Services BC, where I provided co-facilitation of groups for trans children and youth, as well as their parents (supervised by dissertation committee member, Dr. Wallace Wong). The pilot sibling group was to be held in greater Vancouver, with planned topics to be discussed during each of its eight weekly sessions. However, recruitment for group participation yielded a low rate of interest from the community, insufficient for the formation of this pilot group treatment. This low response rate required me to reconceptualize the present study's purpose and research design. Rather than assuming that siblings of trans folk would be interested in participating in a

structured group with other such siblings, I sought to survey whether siblings of trans individuals would be interested in structured support, and what type of support, if any, would be most desired. Participant feedback, summarized below, was consistent with the low response rate to the initially-designed sibling group. However, most participants felt that a support group for siblings of trans folk would likely benefit *other* individuals facing difficulties related to having a trans sibling. Feedback regarding potential group formats and structures, and other alternative forms of support, are described below.

#### **4.9.1. Variable levels of interest in structured support services for siblings of trans folk**

Two participants reported previously high levels of interest in services designed to support siblings of trans individuals during periods in which they were managing personal challenges, when such services were not known or available to them. However, both participants indicated that, by the time of the current study, they no longer needed or desired any such support. Six participants (55%) believed that a sibling group program would be helpful to other siblings who are having more difficulty with a sibling's transition than the participants themselves experienced. Five of these participants (46% of all participants) believed that other siblings would likely benefit from the opportunity to exchange experiences and ideas with one another.

#### ***Discussion of subtheme***

I am not aware of any previous research which has surveyed siblings of trans individuals regarding their interest in additional psychological support and the types of support that would be most helpful to them, if at all. No previous studies have proposed techniques or interventions to support siblings of trans folk. In line with this literature gap, I am not aware of any past pilot group designed for siblings of trans or gender-nonconforming individuals or work examining the utility of any such group.

Due to the gap in literature on siblings of trans individuals, I have once again drawn from research relating to developmental disabilities. A recent systematic review of interventions targeting siblings of individuals with developmental disabilities (Tudor & Lerner, 2015) revealed vast inconsistencies in intervention outcomes when evaluating outcome measures such as the quality of sibling relationships, the non-developmentally disabled siblings' self-esteem, mood-related symptoms, externalizing behaviours, and

the maintenance of knowledge about a sibling's disability. Perhaps the lack of clear benefits from participation in "sibling groups" (i.e., for siblings of individuals with disabilities, TGN individuals, and others) may be partially explained by a lack of motivation and engagement by the siblings who enroll in such groups.

Six participants (55%) recommended that a group designed to support siblings be provided despite their personal lack of interest in any such service. It is not surprising that the majority of the current participants were not interested in participating in any such supportive group, as the large majority (nine; 82%) reported that they accepted their sibling as trans with ease and denied adverse effects from this adjustment. Further, participants in the current study generally described high levels of self-reported support toward their trans siblings, with many describing higher-than-expected involvement in their sibling's transitions. Most participants also described high levels of parental support (both in response to their sibling's trans identity/transition and more generally), cohesive families, at least some degree of acceptance toward their trans siblings, and predominantly socially liberal or progressive parental attitudes and beliefs. These personal and family characteristics likely act as protective factors or "buffers" during the process of adjusting to a family member's transition. Individuals with these protective factors likely need less support through resources such as a sibling group and/or other structured programs. Nevertheless, six of the current participants regarded a "sibling group" as useful for other siblings experiencing greater challenges than themselves.

Some siblings in the current study felt that the format of a sibling group would not be helpful to them, even if they did have unresolved difficulties relating to their sibling's transition at the time of the interview. For example, Mia shared that she would prefer to engage in family therapy as opposed to a sibling group, while Phoebe suggested that she would benefit most if her trans sibling and parents participated in treatment rather than her participating in treatment herself. It is thus crucial that clinicians and program coordinators consider an individual's conceptualization of their personal and family problem areas, and the degree of family conflict and cohesiveness, when determining the type of support program that would be best suited to this individual and/or their family.

#### 4.9.2. Structure and orientation of a hypothetical “sibling group”

Regarding session frequency, bi-weekly sessions were most commonly recommended, with a few participants recommending weekly or monthly sessions. Dani felt that a biweekly drop-in format would likely yield the greatest number of group members.

Two participants (Maxine and Dani) described strategies to maximize group accessibility to prospective group members. Dani suggested alternating group locations weekly so that prospective group members living in opposite ends of a city have equal opportunities to attend. Similarly, Maxine advocated for service outreach to smaller communities outside of centralized service locations, especially given the low base rate of families with a trans family member:

... [Y]ou should definitely make sure to reach out to counselling centres in all the surrounding cities because, like, I probably wouldn't hear about a trans sibling group that was happening in Toronto. But if that group reached out to the [local organization] in [region of residence], then I probably would have been able to hear about it... [M]aybe try and schedule the time of the meeting so that it is most easiest to attend by people coming from far places.

Dani described some personal involvement in a social media group for siblings of trans individuals. She nonetheless described benefits of face-to-face support for siblings over an online group on a social media platform: “...That's probably why face-to-face would be beneficial. Cause then you feel like you know the person; the other people.”

Most participants discussing group format recommended a continuous, ongoing group with either a participant selection process or a more open “drop-in” format, rather than a closed group in which all group members would register prior to the first session. Those study participants who considered a time-limited group generally recommend five to 10 sessions. Some participants believed that the alternative of a single- or multi-day workshop would not be sufficient for interested participants. As Leanne shared:

I feel like a workshop wouldn't be enough. I feel like once a month, because then you sort of go through the month and things might change, and you might have problems within that month... And then at the end of the month, you could talk about your problems, and then maybe when you go back the next month, the problem would be resolved.

Several participants offered strategies to promote commitment among group members.

I feel like it [the group] should be more of a committed thing, but you're always allowed to drop-out, or if you'd like to start, and it's already been going... So, I feel like for the first couple months, you might have people coming in and going out, but then you do have your main people that do stay. (Leanne)

I think it would be good to have a running group because... it annoys me when they're like, "... [A]fter eight weeks your problems are solved! Sucks to suck! You can't come back." [laughs] ... [P]eople should email in to say if they're going to attend, but then anyone can come if they're new. It's not closed. And then if nobody's coming you can cancel it, right? (Maxine)

Quinn recommended individual intake sessions with group members prior to joining the group, as a means of offering more personalized emotional support: "... 'Cause I probably just would have cried a lot. I would have just been really upset. And I think that would be useful. Or give people the option."

Five participants (46%) emphasized the value of exchanging perspectives, experiences, and ideas between group members. For Maxine, such exchanges would help to combat the initial sense of isolation which she had experienced with respect to having a sibling undergo a gender transition:

[E]ven though Eddie doesn't really want to be part of the trans community, I think that making connections to people who are part of that community would have been really cool... When we were going through the transition, in the early stages, it really did feel like we were the only family in the city that was experiencing that.

Four participants (36%) discussed the potential benefits of a group for siblings of trans and nonbinary individuals in which group facilitation is flexible and the group content is loosely structured. For example, it was suggested that facilitator/s could introduce general topics, while group members would self-guide the specific directions of the group discussion.

... As long as [group topics are] not too specific. If it's a subtopic dealing with, I don't know, talking to other family members about... there's a lot you could go off of from there. But if it was too specific then I feel like an hour would be too much time. (Leanne)

... You have a facilitator sort of talking, and then people can share their feelings or experiences, and then talk to each other to ask questions so

that people can sort of understand why they're feeling what they're feeling, or what's different in someone else's scenario. So, I guess it's very individualized. But it would sort of be like a group... focus-group-- With someone just sort of mediating, maybe. (Dani)

I wouldn't envision it being a social occasion—That would probably be a disaster... My experience is that people do want some minimal structure, or they get really bored or frustrated, or you have a wild card in the group who does something wacky... [The facilitator] might have one question like, "Does anyone have something that happened that was really upsetting that they want people's feedback on?" ... I think that's how I would see it (Quinn)

... There's some questions that everybody answers, like, "Do you agree to maintain confidentiality?" "Who's using gender-neutral language?" ... So I think having a facilitator is good to keep the group on track and make sure, also, that everybody's having a chance to talk and share... And then there's an agenda. So people can put in their different topics that they want to talk about... (Maxine)

Dani recommended having two facilitators, a trans person and sibling of trans person:

... [A] sibling [as group facilitator] would probably help other siblings, because then they would be talking from experience, and they would sort of understand what the other siblings are saying when they have problems that they want to express... But also, a trans person would also probably be good, because then they could answer questions, right?

Consistent with a preference for a somewhat structured process-oriented format, several participants expressed distaste toward an educational or didactic group. For example, Andre stated that he did not want a facilitator to be "holding [his] hand and walking [him] through the process and starting from the beginning."

### ***Discussion of subtheme***

Empirical literature on treating individuals with mental health issues suggests that high levels of treatment engagement predicts better outcomes. For example, Bender, Spring, and Kim (2006) recommend a flexible approach to treatment planning that incorporates input from participants when treating adolescents with comorbid substance use and mental health issues. Treatment participants' feedback and suggestions are thus empirically paramount to the design of structured support services, particularly for adolescents.

Participants indicated that they would prefer to participate in a treatment group that incorporates elements of a process-oriented approach. The participants commonly

described how group members would benefit from having opportunities to exchange ideas with other group members regarding their perceptions and shared elements of their experiences. This was contrasted with the option of a didactic group or, alternatively, an unstructured social gathering. In consideration of the latter, a review of the treatments evaluated for siblings of individuals with developmental disabilities, indicated that those which combined psychosocial, psychoeducational, and recreational components were shown to be more effective than those based upon recreational activities alone (Williams et al., 2003). In the case of the current study, an entirely unstructured group would not optimize opportunities for emotional processing which some current participants felt to be likely to benefit other individuals having difficulties adjusting to a sibling's transition.

It appeared that individuals who participated in the current study were generally further along in their process of adjusting to, and understanding, their siblings as trans than those who would most benefit from trans education. If this is indeed the case, educational content would be helpful to siblings who lack understanding of what it means to be transgender, what emotional reactions may arise, and what additional resources are available. In contrast, cis siblings who already have a basic understanding of what it means to be trans but are struggling in their adjustment to their sibling as trans may alternatively benefit from opportunities for in-depth discussions of the various challenges faced by other siblings of trans and nonbinary folk, such as themselves.

#### **4.9.3. Ensuring comfort, trust, and privacy among group members**

In considering whether he would be interested in partaking in a group for siblings of trans folk, Andre expressed some ambivalence concerning privacy, such as knowing a group member from elsewhere:

Maybe just like, the only thing that I too would really be worried about is running into someone you know, or something, but I think the chances of that happening would maybe be really low ... It wouldn't be as difficult as [if] someone asked me about it in school or something, because they would be there for pretty much the same reason.

When considering whether it may be beneficial to have both cis and trans siblings participate in a group together, both Andre and Maxine expressed concern that this may result in group members restricting or censoring what they share in the group to

avoid hurting their sibling, being misunderstood by them, or otherwise contributing to sibling conflict.

[I]f you had the sibling included in the discussion, it would probably limit what some people would be willing to say, or maybe make people more inclined to, I guess you could say, lie, but maybe if they don't exactly have the best relationship, they'd kind of like to "sugar-coat" things, or something like that. (Andre)

... [T]here's a lot of things that I want to talk about that I would be worried if Eddie was also there... Like the feelings of how sudden it was. Because I wouldn't ever want Eddie to think I wasn't accepting him. But there *was* a period where I would have wanted to talk about and maybe say some things that might have suggested I was unsure. And so, having Eddie there would not be the best ... But having [this conversation] with other people who are *also* going through that thought process in their head I think would be helpful. (Maxine)

### ***Discussion of subtheme***

Although privacy concerns associated with any such "sibling group" participation were only discussed by two participants, the risk of knowing fellow group members may pose a real challenge to group cohesion, potentially even interfering with one's willingness to participate in a group altogether. Because trans individuals are faced with stigma and discrimination, siblings may experience discomfort around revealing themselves as siblings of a stigmatized group. The communication of difficulties one experiences due to having a sibling who is faced with social stigma may also render the cisgender sibling vulnerable to any real or imagined possibility betrayal by a fellow group member. Moreover, having a sibling who is trans poses a potential topic by which one may be victimized or alienated by their peers. Furthermore, being privy to knowledge of other personal hardships shared during the group would expose a group participant to other potential vulnerabilities.

Further, the transition status of a sibling may pose an added complication to group membership and engagement. Although this specific topic was not discussed by current study participants, it is possible that group members may be unwilling to discuss their trans sibling when their trans identity has not yet been publicly revealed. Furthermore, in the context of the current media attention to the topic of trans inclusion, group members who are having difficulties accepting or coming to terms with their siblings as trans may experience shame associated with the perceived social immorality associated with their negative reactions. Risks associated with exploitation of information

in the context of the small trans community may be mitigated, but not necessarily resolved, through group rules such as the confidentiality of all information shared within the group. Nevertheless, there are reasonable and complex social risks associated with group participation, and disclosure of a family member's trans identity more broadly, particularly for individuals experiencing distress associated with having a trans sibling.

#### **4.9.4. Prospective session topics**

Across all participant interviews, several topics were described to be relevant in the context of services designed to support siblings of trans folk, and most notably, in the context of a group specifically for siblings of trans and nonbinary folk. The suggested session topics frequently overlapped with other study findings. Prospective session topics suggested by current participants are listed with corresponding interview statements, below.

##### ***The wellbeing of the cisgender siblings themselves, rather than that of their trans siblings***

... I think, for siblings in a support group like this, the concepts that they talk about would have to be relating to them, not to their [transgender]siblings... Like... if they're having trouble with maintaining relationships, and how they feel in their family now, and how they feel about their siblings. (Vanessa)

So, in terms of services, I think that having something for siblings... or for family members... where it's really about your own self-care, and the primary focus isn't your family member who's going through this hard thing. Especially 'cause Shiloh was younger and vulnerable. I think that would have benefited me, if I had had a space where it could have been more [about] something that I was experiencing, rather than feeling like I was supporting Shiloh in experiencing something." (Quinn)

##### ***Initial reactions to the transition and how these changed or progressed over time***

Maybe when you first found out, where they're at today, stuff like that. (Andre)

...[H]ow it was all so sudden for me. (Maxine)

##### ***How to talk about the transition with one's trans/nonbinary sibling and other family members***

... [T]alking to other family members about it... an example of what a topic could be. (Andre)

Or a topic could be, if they have questions that they want to ask their trans sibling, but they don't feel comfortable... (Vanessa)

... Oh! How to talk to the other people in your life about the transition that's happening at home. Because I had no idea! (Maxine)

You know, maybe the sibling is older-- much older-- and is confused or has questions that weren't answered as detailed as [my sibling] had answered questions. (Vanessa)

### ***Dealing with real or perceived judgment and resistance by others***

... [J]ust feeling judged on yourself and your family, and bringing new people into your home, and having people over. And just the judgment I feel would be a big topic. (Leanne)

... [J]ust how to handle parents in general or people who don't agree, and how to support and feel like you're doing the right thing. (Vanessa)

I think the topic of something we talked a lot about would be... your friends' reactions and people you know... [S]ome people are more judgmental and won't want to be friends with you for [that]. It goes against what they believe, type thing. (Dani)

### ***Cisgender sibling as potential intermediaries between their trans sibling and parents during the transition process***

... I would also say that you might find it common that the sibling is the mediator or translator between the trans person and the parents... (Quinn)

Like I said, being the "middle man," not getting to talk to my parents that much about it... (Maxine)

### ***Disproportionate attention toward trans sibling by parents***

I guess another one for me would be feeling like the focus has really shifted away from me during the process of that transition, and just remembering that my feelings are still valid; I'm still an important part of the family and stuff. It's just that my sibling needs to have more energy put into what he's dealing with right now. (Maxine)

### ***Discussion of subtheme***

Each of the above prospective session topics overlap with other themes reported by participants in the current study. The prospective session topics also overlap with those included in the pilot manual which I had developed previously for a pilot sibling group (See Appendix A), initially intended for adolescent (12- to 18-year-old) siblings of trans individuals. However, study participants commonly expressed their distaste for a

didactic group format. Given this feedback, a group for siblings of trans individuals may be more meaningful to its participants when opportunities for communication between group members are optimized. However, the didactic components of the appended sibling group outline may be useful for siblings of trans individuals who, relative to the current sample: have less knowledge of gender diversity; come from less socially supportive or less trans-positive families and peers; and/or are otherwise experiencing greater adjustment difficulties and distress associated with their sibling's trans identity and/or transition. Teaching topics would likely be delivered most effectively when informed by participant preferences and ongoing feedback, as well as age and experiences of the group members. If sufficient interest in "sibling group" participation is yielded in the future, it may be helpful for facilitators to arrange individual pre-group meetings with prospective group members in order to survey their visions, hopes, and expectations of group participation. The topical focus and group structure of group sessions may be tailored in accordance with the ages, experiences, needs, and preferences of group members.

#### **4.9.5. Alternative group formats preferred over sibling support group for some participants**

Two participants suggested potential benefits of individual or family support, rather than a supportive program geared solely toward cisgender siblings. Phoebe suggested that she would personally prefer that support be directed toward her trans sibling and/or to their parents:

... I think the support should be for Peyton... And my parents. Because that seems to be where the problem is... If Peyton was more confident with themselves; if Peyton just started to get some of their own dysphoria and mental health problems figured out, that would help me. And that would probably help my parents if Peyton could just not be so unsure.

Mia shared that if she were to seek support, she would prefer family therapy over a sibling group, as she highly valued collaborative engagement by the whole immediate family:

If I were ever to get any support, I'd want it to be with my family, because I wouldn't want to withhold things from them or make them feel like I am separated from this transition... [I]f I ever did anything where I got counselling or was in a support group, I'd want to do it with

my family. Because, like I said, it's a team effort and I wouldn't want them to feel like I'm isolating myself or anything like that.

### ***Discussion of subtheme***

The two participant perspectives described above stood apart from the rest of the sample, offering vastly different attributions to the challenges faced by their families regarding each their sibling's gender transition. Phoebe shared that she would benefit personally from her trans sibling's and parents' engagement in supportive services, without Phoebe's participation, to reduce their personal challenges. In contrast, Mia presented the perspective that any structured family support would be most effectively carried out in collaboration with the collective family unit. Mia's perspective is comparable to Abrams's (2009) recommendation for clinicians to invite all family members to be involved in treatment to address a sibling's mental illness. In addition to working with families of individuals with mental illnesses, current study participant, Mia, suggests that the inclusion of all family members in treatment or support may additionally help families with their shared adjustment one's gender transition. However, the current study yielded divergent and inconsistent opinions on models of structured support for families of trans folk and the utility of such resources.

## **4.10. Participants in the current study as interested and engaged**

When queried about their participation in the current study, five participants (46%) expressed their personal interest in this study and their support of this research area. Four (36%) viewed their study participation as a means of supporting other families of trans folk. Nine participants (82%) explicitly shared that that they had positive experiences as study interviewees, while none of the participants described any adverse experiences relating to their interview participation. All 11 participants (100%) described their interviews as thorough and complete, with no significant aspect of their experience overlooked. Five (46%) felt that their interview participation provided them the opportunity to reflect upon and communicate their personal experiences. Convergenly, five participants (46%) described that their interview participation represented their first detailed discussion (or one of very few) of their own experience of their sibling's trans identity and transition. Several participants provided both positive and constructive feedback to me regarding the interview structure and style, detailed below.

#### 4.10.1. Interest and endorsement of study's purpose

When asked about their reasons for, or experience of, participating in the research interview, five participants (46%) expressed their personal interest in the study and their support of this research area. These individuals emphasized the importance of exploring the under-researched topic of the experiences of siblings of trans individuals.

[R]esearching siblings makes sense. And supporting trans people especially... 'Cause it's unusual. No one ever talks about—It's so rare to talk about siblings, you know. There's such a focus on parent-child relationships. (Quinn)

I was like, *oh, that's interesting*. 'Cause it's usually the actual [trans] person that's usually talked to about this. So, I thought it was a cool and different way of looking at it, because it's definitely is worthy of being studied, 100 percent... The sibling relationship is usually very different than with the parental relationship. (Vanessa)

In addition, four participants (36%) viewed their participation in the current study as a means of supporting other families experiencing a family member's gender transition.

I volunteered to do this 'cause I think that it's really important, given what I've been through, to give that knowledge back. I think that that's really, really important. (Quinn)

... I thought it [participation in this study] was a really cool opportunity... I think it's something that hasn't really been done before... I think there should be more resources for siblings to be able to talk about what's going on in their family, 'cause families can get quite chaotic when things are chaotic. (Phoebe)

#### ***Discussion of subtheme***

Participants' approval of the study's purpose suggests that at least some siblings of trans folk view their own experiences as a topic worthy of investigation. The current study represents the first of its kind to my knowledge within the academic realm; however, community interest in this topic of inquiry has been demonstrated prominently through media outlets and the online community. Both mainstream and user-generated media outlets have recently covered the topics of the relationships between trans or nonbinary individuals and their siblings' experiences of one's gender transition and trans identity. For example, NBC's *Megyn Kelly TODAY* broadcasted an interview with a transgender girl, her three older brothers, and their parents, in a segment titled, "Siblings of one transgender girl speaks out: 'It profoundly affected me in such a positive way'"

(TODAY, 2018). With respect to content generated by trans individuals and their siblings, multiple YouTube users have posted videos in which they have broadcasted conversations or interviews with their sibling/s on their experience of their trans sibling's identity and transition. A YouTube search of "trans sibling" conducted on April 28, 2018 yielded approximately 12500 results. Of the first 20 search results, six videos were user-published discussions between young trans individuals and their sibling/s (including both cis and trans individuals, themselves), often conducted in question-and-answer or "Q&A" format (e.g., Andrews, 2015; Benton, 2013; Maya, 2017; Russo, 2017; TheTransTwins, 2017). These first six videos of conversations between trans folk and their siblings each yielded between 10864 and 61322 views. The apparent gap between public versus academic interest in a sibling's experience of their sibling's trans identity and transition is thus palpable.

#### **4.10.2. Positive experiences and personal value of the interview itself**

Nine participants (82%) overtly shared that they had positive experiences as interviewees in the current study. None of the participants described any adverse experiences relating to their interview participation. All 11 participants suggested that the content of each of their interviews was thorough and complete. All participants indicated that no significant aspects of their experiences of the interview topic were left unexplored during the interviews.

Five participants (46%) described their interview as an opportunity for personal reflection and expression, through which some participants reported positive personal outcomes.

...[A]s I get older, I find it easier to talk about my own life in retrospect. And so, any opportunity to delve into it opens up... a reason to look back and to analyze... Like, it's one thing to live it and it's another thing to talk about it and realize that there's one continuous theme throughout this [interview], and it's good communication-- it's more than just one person. (Celeste)

I guess it kind of feels like, as I've said, like a release type of thing to actually talk about it to someone instead of just thinking about it... I just feel more comfortable talking about it, I guess, since I've actually done it here now... Since it's pretty much the first time I've ever told anybody, now it kind of just feels like I could do it again and actually now have

my ideas developed verbally, so that I could maybe articulate them better or something. (Andre)

In keeping with the above finding, five participants (46%) indicated their participation in this research interview represented their first detailed discussion, or one of very few, of their own experience of their sibling's trans identity and transition.

Well, I've never sat and talked about everything. It was always little things. So, I feel like it was good to sit down and reflect on what's happened. (Leanne)

I haven't really talked about my experience of the transition this much. Usually people just ask about [my trans brother]. And so, I'd tell them what I know, and I don't really talk about my side of how I view things. So, this was really interesting. (Dani)

### ***Discussion of subtheme***

Five participants (46%) reported limited prior discussion regarding their own experience of their sibling's trans identity and transition. This finding converges with Abrams's (2009) impression that experiences of having a sibling with a mental illness tend to be overlooked in both the family and clinical contexts. Once again, the current study suggests the broader problem that siblings' experiences tend to be overlooked in family circumstances in which one child requires special supports from their parents or family.

In contrast to previously limited personal discussions relating to their trans sibling, nearly half the participants (46%) described their participation in the study interview as an opportunity for personal reflection, often reporting personal benefits from this experience. This finding is in contrast to the low number of participants (two) who felt that they would personally benefit from structured forms of support to address their sibling's trans identity and transition. Perhaps participation in the current study offers a middle-path between a multi-session sibling group versus minimal opportunity for discussion of their own experience of having a trans sibling. Perhaps having even a few hours to describe one's personal experience and answer some questions about how they feel about a sibling's gender identity and their transition is enough to evoke some personal benefits, even if the participant had not previously perceived this conversation to be necessary. In this sense, a single session to reflect on various aspects of their own experience may represent an optimal time commitment-to-benefit ratio.

### **4.10.3. Feedback regarding the interview structure and style**

#### ***Positive feedback***

As mentioned previously, nine participants (82%) explicitly described their experiences of interview participation as positive. Mia described a sense of comfort with the interview approach and selected questions, as well as a sense of feeling “heard” through the interview process.

It's been great, actually. I wasn't nervous beforehand, but I didn't know what to expect, and I think you've been really great and I felt very comfortable. So I really appreciate that. And I thought the questions were very good as well. They didn't feel intrusive at all... And I feel like I've been able to verbalize a lot of my feelings and I feel like I have been heard. So thank you.

Two participants shared positive reflections on the structure and flow of the interview and felt my use of redirection toward topics of empirical interest to be effective.

I think it [the interview] was really well-structured. And for you to catch when we started rambling on, and to bring it back, is something I wish I could do more of often... I think the questions flowed into each other. And you took good leadership in leading the conversation. (Celeste)

I was worried that I was going to forget everything and not be able to answer your questions, but you did a good job directing me to exactly what you wanted me to answer. (Maxine)

#### ***Constructive feedback***

Constructive feedback was provided by three participants (27%), each of whom similarly felt that my questions were at times too vague and did not offer enough structure for them to provide focused responses.

They're really hard questions... It's a really big story, like a year-long story that's been now compressed into two hours... Maybe I felt like I was giving too much information sometimes. And I don't know if that was actually the case. But if that was the case, just... specifying the information you want to know that is important and [separating that from] the information that isn't... (Phoebe)

#### ***Discussion of subtheme***

When participants were asked how their interviews went, feedback was centered on the degree to which I directed the flow of conversation during our interview. The frequency of this topic suggests that this is an important factor in assessing the quality of

an open-ended interview. While two participants felt that my redirection contributed to effective interview sessions, three participants felt my questions were not directive enough. Both this positive and constructive feedback suggest a preference for a relatively directive interview style. As an interviewer, I could have more directly and more frequently interrupted participants when their statements departed from the topics of interest, at the potential cost of rapport. I could have also offered some anchor points to more effectively contextualize my research questions. For instance, I could have collected information about the frequency of sibling contact as follows:

Some sibling pairs see each other every day. Others may only send each other a text once every six months. How much contact do you have with your sibling?

On the flipside, when interview questions have more content, they are more likely to direct and thereby limit the interviewee's responses.

Considering both sides of this issue, the task of presenting open-ended questioning with just enough detail to evoke meaningful responses from a participant is a delicate balancing act. The American Psychological Association's Division 5 *Task Force on Resources for the Publication of Qualitative Research of the Society for Qualitative Inquiry in Psychology* recently published recommendations for designing and reviewing qualitative research (Levitt et al., 2017). The authors refer to a researcher's "catalyst for insight" as their consideration of "the potential for the data to support perceptive analysis" (p. 15). A researcher's catalyst for insight is enhanced when a study's method of data generation should promote insightful analysis. As an example, it is suggested that the interviewer "ask questions that demonstrate sensitivity, clarify issues of uncertainty, and lead to innovative responses" (p. 15). Based on the feedback elicited from current study participants and the qualitative research recommendations by Levitt et al. (2017), the following strategies would have likely enhanced the utility and efficiency of the current qualitative interviews, if applied more consistently: (a) checking in to ensure participant's understanding of the interviewer's questions; (b) utilizing selected anchors to help contextualize questions which require clarification; and, (c) offering gentle redirection when participant's responses are off-base from the research topic and judged to be non-salient to the researcher's dataset.

## **Chapter 5. General Discussion**

### **5.1. Study limitations**

#### **5.1.1. Overrepresentation of supportive, trans-affirmative, and communicative families**

Inherent to the purpose and design of the current study, all participants (most of whom were in their teens) were aware of their sibling's trans identities and were willing to discuss in detail topics related to the sibling's transition. Based on information gathered from study participants (i.e., cisgender siblings), all trans siblings discussed in the current study had disclosed their gender identities to at least one of two parents. Only one participant indicated that one of their two parents was unaware that their child was trans-identifying. Several participants reported previous or current engagement by their parents in resources aimed at supporting their trans children, suggesting that at least one parent per family had taken measures to improve their trans child's quality of life and/or family relationships. In fact, most participants were referred to this study by a parent. These participant features reflect a sample of young individuals from at least partially, to perhaps largely, trans-affirmative families with generally high levels of parental contact and support, as confirmed by the study's findings.

On the flipside, this study underrepresents individuals from families with low levels of family support, low levels of family cohesion and limited contact with other family members, and traditional gender values (if not transphobia). By way of the study's overrepresentation of siblings from generally supportive as well as trans-affirmative families, no participant reported experiences of homelessness, disownment, or estrangement as experienced by them or their trans siblings. All participants stated that they grew up with their trans siblings and described continued ongoing relationships with them. In turn, this study is missing the essential perspectives of siblings from families who rejected their trans siblings.

Overall, the sample seemed to over-represent individuals with close sibling relationships, perceived family cohesiveness, as well as trans-affirmative attitudes by themselves and their parents. Previous research suggests that family support is protective against negative mental health outcomes for young transgender people. In

general, social support is widely associated with better adjustment and mental health outcomes (e.g., Eisenberg & Resnick, 2006; Maguen et al., 2007; Simons et al., 2013 Travers et al., 2012). Given their relatively high levels of family support of their siblings' trans identities and transitions by study participants, it is less surprising that they described relatively low levels of personal distress overall. Moreover, it may be inferred that the current findings likely over- represent positive experiences associated with having a trans sibling and underrepresent potential negative experiences common to individuals from less supportive and trans-supportive home environments.

### **5.1.2. Overrepresented participant characteristics in current sample**

Participants in the current sample disproportionately exhibited attributes and interests that rendered them ideal participants, but perhaps less representative of the population of siblings of trans folk, or the general population of youth and young adults. For example, study participants were observed as having relatively high levels of engagement and comfort in discussing issues related to gender, the transition process, and other personal and family matters. Other individuals may have characterized such topics as “sensitive” and may have been less open to discuss these, particularly in the context of a research interview. The degree of openness observed across study participants may reflect their relatively high level of comfort with their sibling as trans, insight into their trans siblings' experiences, and comfort with discussing trans issues more broadly. From casual observation, it was also my impression that most study participants demonstrated particularly strong expressive communication skills as well as an unusually high level of maturity, especially given the young ages of many of the interviewees. Most demonstrated strong abilities to articulate details of their personal experiences, connecting their experiences with emotional responses, and framing their family's experiences within the context of current societal attitudes toward gender diversity. It is likely that other less insightful and less expressive siblings of trans individuals may have more difficulty understanding and communicating their personal experiences. In short, despite their young ages, study participants appeared to be particularly open, comfortable with trans issues, and psychologically minded.

As mentioned above, the majority of participants shared positive descriptions of their siblings, their sibling and family relationships, and their level of support toward their trans sibling and toward the broader transgender social movement. As a caveat,

participants' responses may have been influenced by positive impression management, or the desires to depict themselves, their transgender sibling, and/or their family in a positive light. In related literature, parental underreporting of their children's internalizing symptoms is a well-reported phenomenon in child psychopathology (e.g., Achenback, McConaughy, & Howell, 1987; Cantwell, Lewisohn, Rohde, & Seeley, 1997; De Los Reyes & Kazdin, 2005). Durwood et al. (2017) suggest that parents of socially transitioned transgender children are especially prone to underreporting their child's symptoms of psychological distress, likely motivated by efforts to justify their decisions to support their child's social transition. In the current study, participants may have been biased toward over-reporting "positive" rather than "negative" aspects of their experiences and underreporting "negative" ones. Participants may have bolstered aspects of their experiences which conform to their current trans-positive values and their notion of a "good" sibling, even if their past experiences have not always corresponded with their current values. In other words, positive impression management may arise from a desire to resolve cognitive dissonance.

Lastly, as mentioned in section 3.2, cisgender narratives are not intended to *cisplain*, or describe trans experiences on behalf of trans people, under the false assumption of equally shared knowledge. I also caution that reading these stories in the absence of the stories of all family members experiencing the trans family member's gender transition paints an incomplete, and potentially unreliable, picture of gender transition within the entire family context.

### **5.1.3. Underrepresentation of racial, ethnic, cultural, and sexual minority identities**

The current study did not adequately address issues of diversity pertaining to race, ethnicity, culture, and sexual orientation. I did not explicitly ask participants about racial identity. Further, only a few participants stated that they identified with a minority cultural identity when queried. Despite having carried out the current study on Indigenous land, to my current knowledge, no participants described having Indigenous heritage and, in keeping, Indigenous perspectives were not explicitly voiced by the study participants, reflecting an unfortunate gap in the cultural representation in this study. Beyond Indigenous identities, the current sample did not sufficiently address the ways in

which sibling experiences may be implicated by being and/or having a sibling who is a person of colour or identifies as a sexual minority.

Quantitative findings suggest that variables relating to minority identity (i.e., ethnic, racial, sexual identities, etc.) are relevant to the degree of emotional distress experienced by transgender individuals themselves. In a study by Lytle, Blosnich, and Kamen (2016), rates of suicidal ideation were higher among trans individuals of sexual minorities than those identifying as heterosexual, and higher among racial and ethnic minorities than non-Hispanic transgender respondents. In regard to the current investigation, stigma faced directly by siblings of trans folk due to racial or sexual minority, and/or that faced by their siblings as a result of multiple minority stressors (i.e., gender, cultural, ethnic, racial, and/or sexual minority) may contribute to more complex challenges relating to the experiences associated with having a trans sibling. Future qualitative interviews with family members of trans individuals who identify as racial, sexual, and cultural minorities would help to further delineate the potential interactions between a family member's individual differences (i.e., one or more minority identities) and the ways in which they make sense of, and adjust to, a family member's trans identity and transition process.

#### **5.1.4. Underrepresentation of individuals with trans-feminine siblings**

Persons who were assigned male genders at birth only account for 3 of the 11 siblings of study participants, as per participant accounts. As expressed by the study's cis siblings, each of these three AMAB individuals identified as female or trans-feminine/nonbinary at the time of the study. There is some empirical evidence of a relationship between levels of social support/acceptance and gender identity when evaluated as a female-male binary. Nonconforming expressions of gender and sexuality tends to be more socially detrimental for cisgender males than females, beginning from a young age (e.g., Carroll, et al., 2012; Bowers & Bieschke, 2005; Poteat & Espelage, 2005; Raj, 2002). Parents are also more likely to reject their gender-nonconforming boys than girls (LaMar & Kite, 1998; Landolt et al., 2004). In consideration of these findings, individuals may have greater and qualitatively different experiences adjusting to having a trans-feminine, rather than trans-masculine or gender nonbinary sibling. Future investigations with siblings of AFAB trans and nonbinary individuals would help to clarify whether the trans sibling's sex at birth and the subsequent "direction" of their transition

differentially impacts a cisgender sibling's experience of the transition process and/or their sibling's gender identity. Despite the under-representation of sibling dyads with trans-feminine individuals in the current study, no salient discrepancies between cis-and-trans gender pairings were apparent from the interview data.

### **5.1.5. Limitations of the interview guide**

My approach to conducting participant interviews was flexible; nevertheless, it was structured upon a specific series of topically-organized questions, as outlined in the Interview Guide (Appendix B). Interview questions were selected based on my assumption that certain topics would be relevant to the participants' experiences of having a trans and/or non-binary sibling. However, the selected interview topics and questions biased the directions of the participant discussions and contributed substantially to the nature of the study findings (i.e., themes). A less detailed interview guide would have offered the participants greater freedom to lead the direction of the interview. It is possible that a more open-ended interview may have yielded quite different study findings. For example, as per the current interview guide approach, I started each interview by asking targeted questions about the participant's personal and family background. Instead, I could have opened each interview by simply inviting the participant to tell me what it was like for them to have a trans or non-binary sibling. This alternative approach would have allowed the participant to provide a less "contaminated" initial description of the phenomenon of interest from their individual perspective. Further, the participant's initial response would have informed which subtopics to explore during the subsequent portions of the interview. In sum, the degree of detail in the current interview guide limited the degree of influence the participants themselves had on the study findings. Despite this limitation, the current interview guide did allow me to tailor interview questions to each participant and prioritize topics that seemed to be most salient to the particular interviewee.

### **5.1.6. Limited generalizability of previous research pertaining to siblings of sexual minority individuals or of those with developmental disabilities**

Overall, findings from the current study were compared with the few previously published experiences of siblings of sexual minority individuals (i.e., gay, lesbian,

bisexual, queer, etc.). The experiences of these sibling populations have both convergent aspects as well as inherent discrepancies. Siblings of individuals who identify as a sexual minority or gender minority may share commonalities in their experiences adjusting to a sibling's marginalized identity which had been historically stigmatized. However, transgender individuals arguably face more stigma than gay, lesbian, bisexual, or otherwise sexually diverse individuals in present Western societies. For example, the pressure from the cisnormative society to present as one's affirmed gender (e.g., through clothing, hair, make-up, legal changes in name and gender markers, gender-affirming medical treatments, etc.), and to conform within the gender-binary system, imposes additional stressors on the lives of trans individuals, including systemic discrimination. Further, medical care typically includes pre-treatment assessments and follow-up medical appointments, while surgical procedures additionally require post-surgical care. These potential components of a gender transition likely contribute to more complex, time-consuming, and often costly investments by both the trans individual and their loved ones, particularly if the individual is a legal minor, attending school or employed, and/or financially dependent on their guardian/s. In this sense, the experience of having a trans sibling includes elements that are distinct from the experience of having a cis sibling who is gay, lesbian, bisexual, or otherwise identifies as a sexual minority.

## **5.2. Practical applications to trans individuals, their cis siblings, parents, broader community, and clinicians**

Based on the study findings, cis siblings with strong and positive sibling relationships frequently see themselves as important sources of support to their trans sibling over the transition process. Bearing in mind that participants generally described supportive family environments, overall, they did not convey that they felt burdened or adversely impacted by their sibling's transition or trans identity. In fact, participants frequently perceived their sibling's transition as positive on several counts. The current study helps to debunk the seeming misperception that young individuals will inevitably struggle with their sibling's gender transition. I hope that trans folk, their cis siblings, and other family members take comfort, pride, and inspiration from the stories shared by the cisgender siblings in this study.

For those individuals having difficulties understanding or accepting their sibling or other familial loved one as trans, findings from this study help to convey the range of emotional responses to a sibling's transgender disclosure and transition. Not all emotional responses to a sibling's trans identity were described as positive, and not all aspects of adjusting to a sibling's trans identity were described as easy, even among the current participants who predominantly characterized themselves as accepting and supportive of their siblings as trans. I hope that the variety of emotional experiences by participants may help to validate or normalize other individuals' difficulties adjusting to a sibling's transition.

I also hope that parents and other family members of TGN individuals may take away from this study the importance of maintaining open and supportive communication within their family. Opening and maintaining conversations about gender diversity may be one of the clearest ways for parents or family members to convey acceptance of gender diversity, even if no family member is yet openly trans.

This study may demonstrate to caregivers the resilience and adaptiveness of their children. Likewise, I hope that this study helps young cis and trans folk to recognize these strengths in themselves. Findings from this study may also help young trans and nonbinary folk who are struggling to recognize the deep sense of respect and admiration felt toward them by their cisgender siblings, likely shared among their other peers and allies. I hope that trans and nonbinary folk recognize the degree of inspiration which they provide to their cis siblings, as seen through their efforts to educate themselves on gender diversity, gender literacy, and a more inclusive society.

Participant accounts suggest that a family member's trans identity disclosure and gender transition processes sometimes contribute to some temporary disruptions to a family's prior state of functioning, or equilibrium. However, some participants described their family's re-established homeostasis over time. I hope that parents will be reassured by the good chance that their children's transitions will be met with acceptance by other family members, and that their family will make it through challenges during the transition just fine, so long as they carry with them loving, supportive, and trusting attitudes.

Current findings suggest that young cis folk are often perceptive to changes in family dynamics during adjustment periods. When a parent puts forth the time and effort to provide the necessary support to their trans or non-binary child, they may become somewhat preoccupied at the expense of attending to their other child/ren. The experiences shared by some of the current study's participants reminds parents to provide each of their children continued emotional support so that they do not feel left behind when aspects of the transition require a parent's extra time. Efforts by parents to check in with their cis child/ren and express interest in their lives is as important during a family member's transition as it is during any other family adjustment. Some of the study's cis participants sensed that, at times, their parents had approached them for the primary purpose of eliciting information about their trans family member. Cis siblings commonly felt that they were stuck in between their parent(s) and trans sibling, and would prefer that their parents address the trans family member directly out of respect for all parties. Here parents are once again reminded to take into consideration the experiences of their cis children even during a period in which their trans children require special emotional and practical supports.

Some participants voiced that questions and comments from others about one's trans or nonbinary sibling may be experienced by cisgender siblings as intrusive. Some suggested that others do their own research to seek answers to their questions on what it means to be trans. In addition, some participants would have preferred that others' questions about their trans sibling be addressed to their trans sibling themselves.

Clinicians working with trans individuals and their siblings may consider these study findings when preparing families for what they may expect after a family member's trans identity disclosure and when helping families to cope with ongoing challenges. The current study uniquely offers insight into the ways in which siblings understand and make sense of their own related roles and experiences. The current findings will strengthen the emerging body of literature that will aid the future development of rationale and guidelines for the provision of treatment to support family members of transgender individuals.

### **5.3. Future directions**

The experience of being a cis person with a sibling who has transitioned would be complemented by a better understanding of a trans person's experience of their sibling over the course of their coming out and transitioning. A trans person's experience of transitioning and one's impressions of family support and functioning cannot be inferred from, or cisplained by, the experiences of their cisgender family members. In the aforementioned study by Katz-Wise et al. (2018), of all participating family members (TGN youth, their parents, and siblings), ratings of family satisfaction by trans and gender-nonconforming youth correlated most closely with their own levels of mental health. The variability between family members in ratings of family functioning cautions the readers of the current study to recognize that siblings' perspectives on their trans sibling's and greater family's experiences may *not* coalesce with the perspectives of these other family members. These findings evidence the importance of future research aimed at understanding the role of cisgender siblings in the transition process from the perspectives of trans family members themselves. For example, future research exploring trans individuals' experiences of sibling support would help to verify whether the described forms of perceived support by cisgender siblings are indeed felt to be helpful to trans individuals themselves.

Continued research would also be helpful in guiding structured support groups for siblings of TGN individuals, in cases in which that demand for such a service is demonstrated and service delivery is feasible. The key teachings included in the initially-developed sibling group outline (see Appendix A) overlap significantly with the topics which the current participants deemed relevant to their experiences. The integration of a supportive-expressive approach and a didactic approach to a sibling group may optimize opportunities for group members to build social supports with other siblings of trans individuals while learning about unknown trans information and expected or already-experienced challenges, within a supportive learning environment.

### **5.4. Summary and conclusion**

Phenomenological research is aimed at capturing the nature and meaning-making of personal lived experiences. Through the current study, I aimed to capture the

lived experience of having a trans sibling, including the experience of having a sibling transition. Recruitment yielded a group of 11 youth and young adults living in metro and greater Vancouver, Victoria, and Toronto. While only a small number of siblings were interviewed in the current study, their personal accounts of their family backgrounds are quite convergent. Most participants shared that they were raised in communicative and supportive families which do not strongly uphold traditional gender values, with parents who have either accepted or worked toward the acceptance of their trans child.

Findings from the current study may be broadly summarized as follows:

1. The cisgender participants described varied and wide-ranging emotional responses to each of their sibling's transgender identity disclosure and transition.
2. Participants shared generally positive attitudes towards their sibling's gender transition and trans identity.
3. Participants perceived their relationships with their trans sibling as stable, if not enhanced, through their gender transition.
4. Participants expressed the importance of showing respect, compassion, and support toward their trans sibling.
5. Participants described adjustments by their broader family unit as shared and manageable experiences.
6. Participants described their peer relations and interactions regarding their trans sibling as mostly but not entirely positive.
7. Participants described some of their interactions with extended family members and others as challenging.
8. Participants shared that having a trans sibling influenced their social beliefs, perceptions, and actions.
9. Participants shared several different perspectives on structured support services for siblings of trans folk.

10. Participants' impressions of the current study suggested interest and engagement in the study and its topics, overall.

Of the few studies which have examined the experiences of families of trans and gender-nonconforming persons, the large majority have not included perspectives of cisgender siblings or have lumped siblings into the category of "family members." A large majority of participants represented in previous family studies have been parents—predominantly mothers—of TGN folk. By aggregating the scant available findings from sibling interviews with those from parents, previous literature has contributed to the possibility of misrepresentation of the sibling experience.

In sum, the findings from this study reflect the perspectives of cisgender adolescents and young adults who generally describe close and supportive sibling and family relationships. These individuals generally believed that they played supportive and positive roles in each of their trans sibling's transition. Study findings suggest that, within these supportive families, cisgender siblings do not experience significant detriments due to their sibling's transition. Challenges for cisgender siblings related to parental and broader family relations, as well as certain peer relations. Such challenges were generally described as manageable "bumps in the road" over the course of their sibling's transition and their family's adjustment. Overall, the cisgender siblings who were interviewed were not interested in additional structured support focused on their experience of their sibling's transition. However, they did believe that other individuals facing challenges related to their trans sibling's gender identity and/or transition may benefit from structured support, such as a "sibling group." Prospective relevant topics for such a group were summarized. This study is the first to offer substantive first-hand accounts from individuals on their experiences of having transgender and nonbinary siblings and of the transition process itself.

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## Appendix A.

### Outline of Pilot Group for Adolescent Siblings of Trans Individuals: An Explorative Support Group

**Eliminated from protocols of research project titled:**  
*The Experience of a Sibling's Trans Identity and Gender Transition: A Phenomenological Multiple Case Study*

(supported by SSHRC Joseph-Armand Bombardier CGS Doctoral Scholarship)

**Number of sessions:** 8  
**Length of sessions:** 1.5 hours

*The purpose of this group is to provide an emotionally safe environment in which adolescent siblings of transgender and gender-variant (i.e., trans) individuals may explore and share their personal experiences following their sibling's disclosure of their transgender identity and learn more about these experiences. Given that this is the initial pilot of this group, this manual is intended to be implemented in a flexible manner. Moreover, discussion questions are intended to be used as a guide. The facilitator is encouraged to add, omit, and modify questions based on the topical directions of comments by group participants. Group topics may be carried over from one session to the next when the facilitator deems appropriate. Nevertheless, it is intended that all topics included in this manual are explored with group members in the general order in which they are presented in this manual.*

#### **Summary of Session Topics:**

- Session 1 Introduction to Group, Gender, & The Experience of a Sibling Transitioning**
- Session 2 Reactions to a Sibling's Gender Transition**
- Session 3 Negotiating Names and Pronouns; Adjusting to Changes in Family Roles and Relationships**
- Session 4 Identifying Personal Needs, Self-Care, and Coping**
- Session 5 Exploring the Roles of an Ally or Advocate**

- Session 6** Navigating Difficult Interactions with Peers and Adults Outside of Family
- Session 7** Responding to Difficult Questions and Statements from Peers and Adults Outside of Immediate Family
- Session 8** Guest Speaker and Closing Remarks

**SESSION #1 – INTRODUCTION TO GROUP, GENDER, & THE EXPERIENCE OF A SIBLING TRANSITIONING:**

**INTRODUCTION OF GROUP FACILITATOR AND MEMBERS:**

Group facilitators will introduce themselves and disclose their credentials and academic affiliation (i.e., SFU). They will provide the name of the registered clinical psychologist supervising this group. They will also provide the names of other members of the research team and their roles.

Group will engage in an *ice-breaker* game in which each member will:

- (a) State first name.
- (b) Share something you are proud of.
- (c) Share something you look forward to.

**IDENTIFYING GROUP RULES:**

- (i) Must be willing to attend all group sessions on time.
- (ii) Must keep *all* information shared by other group members confidential (including all information about siblings and other family members).
- (iii) Must be willing to self-disclose.

**THE ISSUE AND IMPORTANCE OF GROUP CONFIDENTIALITY:**

Facilitator will indicate the limitation in her ability of protecting clients' confidentiality (i.e., confidentiality in a group setting can neither be guaranteed nor enforced legally). She will thus emphasize the ethical importance of the group agreeing to maintain confidentiality and will attain group confidentiality agreements from all group members. Agreeing to group confidentiality includes the following:

- (i) Not using the names of group members outside of the group.
- (i) Not disclosing what any group members talked about in group to anyone outside of the group.

*Facilitator will obtain verbal commitment from each group member by asking each member if they agree to protect the confidentiality of other group members.*

## **REMINDER OF THE PURPOSE OF THIS GROUP:**

### **This group is a place for you to:**

- (i) Learn about how your sibling's gender transition affects you personally, how it affects your sibling and your family, and how to deal with difficult feelings and situations in a practical way.
- (ii) Share your thoughts, feelings, and experiences, whether they are negative, positive, or neutral. We encourage you to talk about negative or even conflicting feelings you may have about your sibling's gender transition.
- (iii) Learn from each other's thoughts, feelings, and experiences.
- (iv) Explore how your thoughts, feelings, and relationships may change over time.

### **INTRODUCTORY PROCESSING DISCUSSION: YOUR SIBLING AND THEIR TRANSITION**

**Say:** Let's take turn introducing our siblings. I'd like to hear more about who they are as people and who they are as your siblings.

- (a) Introduce your sibling by their preferred first name.
- (b) Tell us a little bit about who are they are. What are three adjectives you would use to describe them?
- (c) What do you like about them? What are their interests?
- (d) What has your relationship been like growing up? they are like, their strengths, their interests.

**Say:** Now I'd like for you to share more about their transition process and your perspectives and feelings about it.

- (a) Where are your siblings in the process of their transitions?
- (b) Do you have any thoughts or feelings about this process?
- (c) Are there parts of their transition process that you would like to know more about?
- (d) Would you be willing to share a little bit about how you have been affected personally by this experience?

### **SHARING GOALS AMONG GROUP MEMBERS:**

- (a) What do you hope to get from this group?
- (b) What topics do you hope we cover?

### **EXPLORING GENDER:**

#### **Elicit discussion about gender.**

**Ask:** So, what is gender anyway?

### **KEY POINT: GENDER IS A SOCIAL CONSTRUCT.**

It is different from the concept of biological sex.

*Definitions and group discussion about difference between sex and gender:*

**Biological or anatomical sex:** someone's physical anatomy, used to assign gender at birth; it is a myth that there are only two options- male and female- there is a range of variation in physical and chromosomal makeup.

**Gender** does not actually have to match with a person's bodily anatomy. Biological sex and gender are different.

*"Toys, colors, clothing, hairstyles, and activities do not have a gender of their own. They are given a gender designation by our society." (Kay, 2014, p. 416).*

**Ask:** What do you think of this statement? Do you agree/disagree?

*Describe difference between gender identity and gender expression.*

**GENDER IDENTITY:** *Who you feel you are inside.* Someone may have a deeply felt sense of being male, female, both, or neither. It can be different from the biological sex assigned at birth. It isn't necessarily visible to others. Everyone determines their own gender identity. Usually people have a sense of their gender identity from a very early age and whether or not it matches their biological sex (i.e., Brill & Pepper, 2008, p. 4).

**GENDER EXPRESSION:** *How we outwardly express our gender to others.* We do this through clothing, hairstyles, mannerisms, how we speak, how we play, how we socialize, and the roles we take on (Brill & Pepper, 2008, pp. 4-5).

Gender expression is simply one aspect of exploring identity, a natural part of development (Kay, 2014).

### **PROCESSING DISCUSSION: GENDER**

(a) What beliefs about gender did you grow up with in your family?

(b) What are your own beliefs about gender and what it means in society?

*(break)*

**KEY POINT: A lot of people think about gender as a major component of identity.**

A lot of people think about gender as a big part of who we are. This is why, when a close family member comes out as trans, we often go through a profound process of re-thinking and re-understanding this person's entire identity, not just their identity as a male, female, or trans-person.

**KEY POINT: Being transgender refers to gender identity—not gender expression.**

Transgender individuals often describe themselves as girls feeling like they are in boys' bodies, or boys feeling like they are in girls' bodies. The term 'transgender' refers to how they feel inside. Not all individuals who identify as "transgender" choose to change the way they outwardly express their gender to friends, family, or schoolmates. Not all transgender folk decide to change their clothes, take hormones, or have surgeries to change their bodies, but some do.

*Some* transgender folk choose to change their *gender expression*—that is, change the way their gender appears to others. Coming out as transgender and transitioning may occur at any time in a person's life (i.e., Norwood, 2012). Changing one's gender expression consists of either or both of the following:

(a) Social transition.

May include:

- (i) Coming out as trans (male/female, two-spirited, gender-nonconforming, etc.).
- (ii) Requesting that others refer to them by a different name and/or pronoun.
- (iii) Wearing clothes or participating in activities that are stereotypical of their affirmed gender.

(b) Medical transition:

Includes any type of intervention that involves hormones or surgery to make the appearance of the body more congruent with an individual's affirmed gender.

This process may affect this person's family and romantic relationships in lots of different ways.

**PROCESSING DISCUSSION:**

- (a) Who here has felt that when your sibling came out as trans, you were just introduced to a whole new person?
- (b) Who has felt that their sibling was still the same person, but only one part of them has changed?
- (c) Does anyone feel differently now than you did when your sibling first came out?

**GROUP EXERCISE: VISUAL REPRESENTATIONS OF THINGS THAT HAVE BEEN CONSISTENT AND CHANGED SINCE TRANSITION EXPERIENCE**

Present group with paper, pens, magazines, scissors, & glue.

**Say:** I'd like you to do some creative brainstorming in the form of writing, drawing, collaging, or a combination of these. Brainstorm the aspects of your lives and your families that have remained consistent since their sibling "came out" or began their transition. Then, brainstorm things that have changed for you and your families since their sibling "came out" or transitioned.

Here's one way to do this: Create a chart. Label the first column, "things that have stayed the same" and to label the second column, "things that are new or different".

*This exercise is intended to represent the reported dialectic struggles between presence vs. absence and sameness vs. difference among family members of transgender individuals (Norwood, 2012).*

**PROCESSING DISCUSSION: EXERCISE FOLLOW-UP**

***Elicit descriptions of charts/collages. Examples of discussion questions:***

- (a) Tell us about what you have drawn/written.
- (b) In what ways have (your) \_\_\_\_ stayed the same over the course of this transition? What do you make of this consistency? How does it make you feel?
- (c) In what ways have (your) \_\_\_\_ changed since your sibling began their transition? What do you make of this change? What is this change like for you?

Thank group for sharing and provide some positive feedback.

Invite any final thoughts or questions from group members.

**INTRODUCTION TO NEXT SESSION'S TOPIC:**

**Say:** Next week we will focus on what your sibling's transition has been like for you.

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## SESSION #2 – REACTIONS TO A SIBLING’S GENDER TRANSITION

### ***Ice-breaker:***

Introduce yourself to group members again. State your name. Share one thing that you did or something that happened this week that you liked and one that you didn’t like.

### **INTRODUCTION TO REACTIONS TO THE TRANSITION**

It is very common for people to have many different reactions, thoughts, and feelings about a family member’s transition that change over time. Some of you may feel that going through this is like your sibling’s coming out process in some ways. Like coming out, your own experience may have many stages and a lot of different thoughts and feelings about what this transition entails.

### **EXERCISE: BRAINSTORMING PERSONAL REACTIONS**

Elicit list of “reactions” (thoughts, feelings, or things that you did, i.e., behaviours) that group members have gone through or are currently going through since their siblings came out and over the course of their transition so far. Write these down on white board.

*Ask:* What other reactions may someone in your situation experience?

Label these “reactions” as thoughts, feelings, or behaviours. Try to elaborate upon, distinguish, and make connections between, the thoughts, feelings, and behaviours on this list.

### **KEY POINT: SIBLINGS MAY HAVE A UNIQUE EXPERIENCE THE TRANSITION DIFFERENT FROM THAT OF FAMILY MEMBERS:**

While the entire family is going through a lot of change and adjustment, siblings have special relationships that are different from relationships between parents and children or between friends. You may relate to parts of your sibling’s experience with their own transition and what your parents and other family members are going through in certain ways. At the same time, you are also going through a *unique* experience as a sister or brother.

### **PROCESSING DISCUSSION:**

- (a) Are there parts of this experience that you feel like you are going through on your own or in a special way?
- (b) What feelings are associated with this experience?
- (c) Can anyone relate to feeling left out by their parents in any way (i.e., in light of parental attention to sibling’s transition)?

### **KEY POINT: SOMETIMES WE MAY FEEL THAT WE CAN’T SHARE OUR FEELINGS WITH OUR TRANS SIBLING OR OUR FAMILY:**

When trans individuals think about coming out to their family members, they often want

to express their true selves, but they may be afraid that their family may reject or abandon them (Heck, Croot, & Robohm, 2015).

Like our siblings who are transitioning, sometimes *we* may feel uncomfortable about sharing difficult reactions with our trans sibling or our family. We may feel that we need to keep feelings bottled up inside, in order to protect important relationships (Heck et al., 2015).

### **PROCESSING DISCUSSION:**

(a) Do you ever have any thoughts or feelings that you don't feel you can share with your trans sibling or with your family?

(b) What was that like for you?

(c) Would you be willing to share these thoughts or feelings in confidence with the group?

*(break)*

### **EXERCISE: VALIDATING EMOTIONAL RESPONSES**

#### ***Say:***

After a loved one comes out as transgender, it is common for family members to experience feelings of shock, horror, betrayal, disbelief, anger, anxiety, and sadness or depression.

There are perfectly valid reasons that someone would feel each and all of these things after our sibling comes out as trans, especially in a society that doesn't tend to teach what it means to be trans, or that being trans is okay.

Society doesn't teach us how to deal with this transition or how to support our family member, so hearing that our sibling is trans may be shocking, scary, confusing, sad, exciting, or bitter-sweet. Maybe you felt a lot all at one, or different feelings at different times. Or maybe you have never thought about what you felt about the transition then, or even today.

***Return to list of emotions that group members have developed. Ask group members to brainstorm valid (i.e., reasonable) thoughts that may justify these emotions, even if acting on these feelings may not always be effective.***

**KEY POINT: There are many reasonable feelings in response to a sibling's transition, including those that are unpleasant or undesirable.**

**IN WHAT WAYS ARE REACTIONS TO A SIBLING'S TRANSITION REASONABLE OR JUSTIFIED? (partially adopted from Kay, 2014):**

**Fear and denial:**

These are often the first responses that people have to a family member coming out as trans.

We experience fear when there is a threat to our safety or wellbeing. This is the feeling that gets us to flee from danger. Sometimes we deny threats because we fear that even the very thought of the threat is overwhelming and we may not yet be prepared to tolerate this. And so, we may push away the thought of our sibling as trans (or in other words, deny it) because it feels like too much for us to deal with right now. Denial may often include the denial that gender identity itself is an issue. Moreover, we may experience denial or fear because of the long history of societal judgement and stigmatization toward transgender people.

**Confusion and Frustration:**

Confusion is a mental state that we experience when we don't have all the information to understand something, or the information is coming so quickly that it too much for us to absorb. We may feel confused when the information we are receiving is very new to us, or very complicated. Learning that your sibling is trans can be all of these things. You may feel that you don't know enough about what is going on for them, or how you should respond. Or you may be learning a lot of different things and making different family adjustments all at once. Or you may feel so many different things one after another and feel caught between different emotions.

Frustration is a particular type of anger that we feel when something is blocking us from getting what we want or need. Often, when we are confused we also feel frustrated. We may feel frustrated because we want more clarity about what we are feeling or going through, or what our sibling and family is going through. Sometimes we may also feel frustrated because we may want more support or even time with our family and they are preoccupied with dealing with this transition. Or we may feel frustrated because the transition is taking up so *much* of our time that we don't have the time to do other things we want to do that are important to us, or maybe we just want space and privacy.

**Guilt/shame:**

We feel guilt when we have done something or reacted in a way that clashes with what we value and belief to be right or morally good. We feel shame when we have done something or reacted in a way that doesn't fit with the values of society. Some people may feel some regret that they had not been more supportive of their sibling or family member earlier and feel guilty about this. They may also feel guilty things about things they have said that may have been hurtful. Or they may feel guilty or ashamed that they had feelings that they considered to be negative toward their sibling (like anger, fear, sadness, and grief). On the other hand, if we have been raised in a family or a culture that doesn't respect or discriminates against trans people, we may feel ashamed about *having* a sibling who is trans.

**Sadness/grief:**

Grief is a valid emotion when we experience *loss* of something important to us.

It is not uncommon for family members to feel a sense of loss of their trans family members' former identity.

For example, parents may feel that they have lost their son or daughter. Maybe some of you have felt that you lost your brother when they came out as a girl, or sister; or that you lost your sister when they came out as a boy, or brother.

On an online post, one woman shared her feelings of loss after her brother came out as a female. She wrote (Norwood, 2012, p. 83): "*I recently lost my only other brother to cancer, and feel as if I am losing my other brother. I cannot think of him as a sister*".

This can be very painful and this feeling often comes as a surprise to the individual. It can even feel like a death in the family for some family members. For some, these feelings of sadness and grief can make it very difficult to lend support to trans relatives.

**PROCESSING DISCUSSION:**

- (a) Which of these responses can you relate to?
- (b) How did you move from stage to stage?

**DISCUSSION (CONTINUED): A FOCUS ON GRIEF**

- (a) Can any of you relate to the experience of grieving the loss of a sister or brother?
- (b) Has this ever interfered with your ability to accept and support your sibling's transition?
- (c) Could you tell us more about what this has been like from you?

**KEY POINT: EMOTIONS OFTEN CHANGE OVER TIME AND MAY EVENTUALLY LEAD TO ACCEPTANCE**

After processing very difficult and uncomfortable feelings, families often experience a stage of acceptance and willingness.

**Joy, celebration, & gratitude:**

Once we accept our sibling as they are, we may eventually arrive at a stage of feeling appreciation for our siblings, the positive changes they have made in their lives, and our own progress in our *own* personal journey. This may involve recognizing that we are brave and genuine, that our sibling is brave and genuine, and that our parents and the rest of our family are brave for supporting this transition (Kay, 2014).

**PROCESSING DISCUSSION: WORKING TOWARD EXCEPTANCE**

- (a) Has anyone noticed their feelings change over time in response to your sibling's transition, or other issues that have come with this?
- (b) Has anyone felt a sense of celebration or gratitude for their sibling after they have come out?
- (c) What about celebrating or feeling proud of *ourselves* during this process?

**KEY POINT: ACCEPTANCE IS HEALING**

In general, when we have difficult or painful emotions, it is helpful for us to accept that you are having this feeling. Accepting that we have a feeling, even one that is very painful, allows us to validate what we are experiencing (i.e., this experience is real; this feeling is happening in me and my body) and move forward.

**MINDFULNESS EXERCISE:**

Get in a comfortable position that will facilitate attention (i.e., feet on floor, relatively straight back, etc.). Now choose one feeling that you are having or have had over the course of your sibling's transition. We will do a two-minute exercise. During this time, notice what physical feelings you experience in your body with this emotion. Try to observe these physical sensations without judgement—that means, not thinking about these sensations as good or bad. They just are.

We will do this exercise for two minutes. Begin.

**MINDFULNESS DEBRIEF DISCUSSION:**

- (a) What was this mindfulness exercise like for you?
- (b) What emotions did you choose? Why do you think you chose this?
- (c) Was it difficult to focus on this emotion? Easier than expected?
- (d) When your attention wandered from this emotion, were you able to bring yourself back?

**INTRODUCTION TO NEXT SESSION'S TOPIC:**

*Say:* Some of you may relate to the experience of being asked to call your sibling by a different name or pronoun. We will talk about this next week, along with changes in your role in the family and your family relationships since your sibling began their transition.

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**SESSION #3: NEGOTIATING NAMES AND PRONOUNS;  
ADJUSTING TO CHANGES IN FAMILY ROLES AND RELATIONSHIPS**

***Ice-breaker:***

- (a) Name one thing you like in your life right now and one thing you don't.
- (b) Tell us what has been going on in your life that has been important to you over the past week.

**PROCESSING DISCUSSION: NEGOTIATING NAMES AND PRONOUNS**

- (a) Has your sibling requested that you call them by a different name? Pronoun?
- (b) Has anyone been asked to call your "brother" your "sister" or your "sister" your "brother"?

Or maybe you have been asked to call them your sibling or some other gender-neutral word?

- (c) What has this been like for you?
- (d) What about this has been most difficult for you?
- (e) Did your response to this change or become easier over time?

***(break)***

**KEY POINT: SUPPORTING THE TRANS FAMILY MEMBER HAS REAL, POSITIVE OUTCOMES**

Recent interviews with transgender parents (Pyne, 2012) showed that trans parents often feel that their family's use of their chosen names and gender pronouns are symbols of acceptance by their family. It is a way for family members to express support.

Relationships do tend to change after a family member comes out as transgender, whether the outcome is positive or negative (Norwood, 2012). Just as "coming out" impacts you in profound ways, your reactions to this do tend to impact trans family members.

Despite difficulties, relationships do tend to improve over time (e.g., Pyne, 2012).

Just as with family members who come out as gay, lesbian, or bisexual, negative family reactions can be very stressful for the trans person. However, there is good evidence that when family reactions are positive, they can be a huge stress relief for the person coming out (based on LGBTQ research: Beeler & DiProva, 1999; Connolly, 2006; Norwood, 2012, p. 78)

Lending support to transgender siblings can also be a valuable bonding experience for the both of you, or for your siblings as a whole unit, if there are more than two of you (based on LGBTQ research: Mallon, 1999).

**PROCESSING DISCUSSION: CHANGING ROLES AND ACTIVITIES**

- (a) What about family roles (e.g., brother to sister/ sister to brother)? Any changes in things that you may expect to do together?
- (b) Have you noticed any changes in this over time since your sibling “came out”?
- (c) Has your relationship with your parent(s) changed since your sibling came out? If so, how?
- (d) What other things have changed in your family?
- (e) Have any conflicts arisen? How have you and your family dealt with these?
- (f) What are your hopes for your family as you move forward?

**INTRODUCTION TO NEXT SESSION’S TOPIC:**

**Say:** Next week we will take the focus off of your experience with your sibling and your family and we will devote a group to other parts of your *own* life. We will talk about things you want in life and how to satisfy these.

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## **SESSION #4: IDENTIFYING PERSONAL NEEDS, SELF-CARE, AND COPING**

### ***Ice-Breaker:***

If you could travel anywhere in the world tomorrow, where would it be and why?

### **MID-GROUP CHECK-IN:**

***We are about half-way through this group.***

- (a) Any thoughts on the group so far?
- (b) Have you noticed any changes in how you feel since we started the group?
- (c) Any changes in your family since we started the group?

### **INTRODUCTION TO SESSION TOPIC:**

As mentioned last week, this session is devoted to things in your life aside from your sibling's transition. We know that your sibling and their process of transitioning is important, but you're important to and you have a life. A good portion of this session is about dealing with other aspects of your lives.

### **GROUP EXERCISE: REFLECTING ON PERSONAL NEEDS AND DESIRES**

The facilitators create a chart with two columns labelled:

- (a) Wants/needs that are fulfilled.
- (b) Wants/needs that are not being fulfilled.

*Explain:* The first column represents the things in life that you want or need (e.g., time to do things you enjoy, alone time, socializing time, quality time with your parents or brothers/sisters, support from others, privacy at school, etc.). The second column represents things that you want or need that you aren't getting enough of right now because of family issues (e.g., could be relating to you or your family's lack of time and energy, family conflict, new family activities and responsibilities, lack of understanding about your sibling's transition at school or in the community, etc.).

*Fill in these columns together as a group. Encourage group members to create their own personal lists for their own self-reflection.*

### **PROCESSING DISCUSSION: PERSONAL NEEDS AND DESIRES**

- (a) In what ways can you get the things that you want and need but aren't getting right now?
- (b) Would you consider requesting these things?
- (c) Do you have any creative solutions to satisfying unmet needs and desires?

***(break)***

### **COPING AND SELF-CARE**

#### **DISCUSSION:**

What things are you doing just for you?

*Briefly discuss importance of balanced sleeping, eating, and exercise.*

**KEEPING A JOURNAL (Brill & Pepper, 2008, p. 90):**

Many people find it helpful to write any thoughts or feelings about this process for you; recording difficulties and any progress toward acceptance.

Reflect on any changes in yourself or your relationship with family members.

**JOURNAL EXERCISE:**

*Facilitator will hand out note books to group members.*

Now, we will return to the topic of your sibling's transition and how it has affected you and your family. We will spend 10 minutes free-writing about thoughts about family transition.

**DISCUSSION QUESTION:**

Did anyone gain any new or fresh insights about this personal experience after journaling about it?

Did anyone gain any insights about yourselves and your own lives in general?

*Facilitator will encourage group members to share excerpts from their journal entries with the group. She will then encourage other group members to express how they relate to these excerpts.*

**Optional home exercise:** Spend five minutes writing thoughts in journal every day this week, about your family's transition and other aspects of your lives.

**INTRODUCTION TO NEXT SESSION'S TOPIC:**

**Say:** Does anyone feel like you have taken on extra roles and responsibilities since your sibling "came out" or started their transition? Next week we will focus on what your sibling's transition has been like for you.

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## **SESSION #5: EXPLORING THE ROLES OF THE ALLY OR ADVOCATE:**

### ***Ice-breaker:***

Share one fun or interesting thing you did this week.

### **Review journal exercise.**

### **DISCUSSION:**

What is an ally?

What is an advocate?

### **PLAYING THE ROLE OF THE ALLY TO YOUR SIBLING**

Siblings can sometimes be their trans brother's or sister's "biggest cheerleader" in helping them adjust to their new gender role. As a brother or sister, you play a very important role in your sibling's life. And you are agents of change. There is a lot of research that suggests that family support plays an important role in trans people's health and wellbeing (e.g., Resnick, Bearman, Blum, et al., 1997; Simons et al., 2013).

You can use your knowledge, sensitivity, and savviness to support your sibling, and even make important social changes in your school and community. Your family experience can be used as a strength in other life situations as well (e.g., relating to others going through similar experiences, learning to interact in a diplomatic way, taking on leadership roles in human equality and social justice movements, etc.).

### **PROCESSING DISCUSSION:**

Do you ever feel obligated to take on new roles in your family? In what ways?

### **EXPRESSING SUPPORT THROUGH ACTIVITIES:**

In addition to using the requested names and pronouns, there are other ways of expressing love and support for your sibling's gender expression (from Brill & Pepper, 2008, p. 92-101).

**Openness to new activities:** Supporting your sibling's gender may mean spending time doing activities with them that you may never have tried or imagined doing. Try to be willing and open-minded. Regardless of whether the activity is stereotypically more masculine or feminine, try to fully participate in the activity without judgment. This is an opportunity for you to try something new.

**Reciprocity:** Exploring new activities that your sibling has taken up or is trying out is one way of showing support. Another way to show support is to continue to invite them to do things with you, even if these activities may not be stereotypical of their affirmed gender.

**Flexibility:** Being supportive here includes being mindful of the possibility that they may, or may not, enjoy participating in activities with you that they used to. Be flexible and open to however they may respond. Don't push or pressure them to do things they are not comfortable doing.

*Elicit examples of new activities group members have been invited to participate in with their siblings.*

**A note on clothing shopping and appearance:**

If you shopped together before their transition, continue to invite them to go shopping. Shop with them in any department. If they want to try out make-up, they will feel supported by you if you are open to this, even if this is something new. Encourage them to dress or wear their hair in ways that feel most comfortable to them.

*Elicit examples of group members' attempts to support their siblings in their affirmed gender expression.*

*(break)*

**PROCESSING DISCUSSION: Introduction to Supportive Roles Outside of Family Home**

- (a) Do you feel that you've taken on new roles outside of your family homes since your sibling started their transition? What have these new roles been?
- (b) What has this been like for you?
- (c) Has anyone ever stood up for you during difficult times in your life? How did that feel? What was that like for you? How can we learn from this to help out our siblings?
- (d) Are there any ways that taking on positive or supportive roles have brought to light any personal strengths? Any family strengths? In what ways?

**Home exercise:**

Elicit list of difficult interactions you may have had, or expect to encounter, with people outside of family (i.e., peers, teachers, other adults) and how you may handle these.

**INTRODUCTION TO NEXT SESSION'S TOPIC:**

**Say:** This session we've talked about ways to support your sibling and we have introduced the topic of acting as an ally or advocate both within and outside of the family home. Next session we will continue to focus on your role as an ally or advocate by discussing how you respond to difficult interactions with peers or adults outside of the family. This can be a very challenging experience and you will learn skills that will boost your confidence in handling these situations.

## **SESSION #6: NAVIGATING DIFFICULT INTERACTIONS WITH PEERS AND ADULTS OUTSIDE OF FAMILY**

### ***Ice-breaker:***

*“Two lies and one truth”:* The goal of this exercise is to share something about yourself with the group that will surprise us. Choose what you will share and then come up with two things about yourself that are not true. We will then guess which of your statements was true and which ones were false.

### **DISCUSSION: DIFFICULT COMMENTS AND QUESTIONS FROM OTHERS**

- (a) Would anyone be willing to share difficult things that other people have said to you or asked you in regard to your sibling’s transition?
- (b) How did you deal with this? What was it like for you?

### **KEY POINT: YOU HAVE THE CHOICE AND THE SKILLS TO STAND UP FOR YOURSELF AND YOUR SIBLINGS.**

You have the freedom to tolerate only kindness and respect toward your gender-variant sibling. You may not be able to change anyone’s opinions or views, but you have to right to express your feelings and opinions (Brill & Pepper, 2008).

### **Example:**

Raise your hand if you feel that littering is morally wrong. Raise your hand if it makes you sad? Angry? Worried or anxious?

Let’s say you carpool to school with a friend and they dump their garbage from their fast food breakfast out the window onto the road every single day. How would it feel to drive with them to school every day and never tell them that their littering bothers or upsets you?

*Responses from group members may relate to increased frustration or anger, bottling up negative emotions, losing respect for your friend, or the feeling of being “walked on” or losing self-respect.*

When we get into conflicts with others, we want to do what we can to take care of our relationships, especially those that are important to us (e.g., friends, families, romantic partners), but never at the cost of our own values, needs, or our own self-respect. We need to be mindful of what is important to us to be sure that we deal with conflicts in ways in which we can feel good about the relationship and also continue to feel good about ourselves.

### **Components of DBT FAST skills (Linehan, 2014):**

These skills were developed by Marsha Linehan and her colleagues as part of Dialectical Behaviour Therapy (DBT). The goal of these skills is to assert self-respect for yourself without damaging relationships. Part of self-respect is standing up for the things that are

important to us and the things that we value and believe in. When we don't stand up for ourselves or the things that are important to us, we may slowly eat away at our self-respect.

**“F” – (be) Fair**

*Be fair to the other person, and to YOURSELF!*

*Don't put the other person's needs or desires above your own, or keep your needs or desires to yourself. Be assertive, not aggressive or passive aggressive.*

**“A” – (no) Apologies**

*No unjustified apologies. Do not apologize for making a request or for taking up space. Don't apologize for having your own opinion.*

*Over-apologizing for standing up for what you believe in can perpetuate feelings of frustration, resentment, or self-betrayal. This is the opposite of self-respect!*

**“St” – Stick to values**

*Don't compromise or abandon your OWN VALUES to try to please others or conform.*

*If another person expects you to compromise things that are important to you, then the relationship may not be the best fit for you.*

*Make time to do the things that are important to you, and both you and your relationships with your family and friends will be healthier for it.*

*(break)*

**Review FASt skills.**

**KEY POINT: When making a request or saying 'no', we can vary intensity and firmness depending on the situation.**

***Examples:***

(a) Responding to the wrong use of pronouns:

“I would really appreciate it if you would refer to Rory as a (girl/boy) rather than a (boy/girl) and I know that Rory would appreciate this too.”

(b) Responding to teasing:

“It really upsets me when you tease Rory. Please stop.”

(c) Responding to repeat teasing/bullying:

“I will not tolerate any negative talk about Rory in my presence.”

**Skills to enhance effectiveness:**

**1. STAY MINDFUL:**

Two techniques to help you maintain your position without getting distracted:

**(a) Broken Record:**

Keep asking, saying no, or expressing your opinion (over and over and over). You can paraphrase the specific request, or just keep saying the exact same thing. Maintain your position. Keep a mellow tone of voice.

**(b) Ignore:**

If the other person attacks, threatens or tries to change the subject, IGNORE their threats or comments. Don't let them divert you. Just keep making your point.

**2. APPEAR CONFIDENT:**

Confident tone of voice.

Confident physical manner.

Appropriate eye contact.

No stammering, whispering, staring at the floor, etc.

Maintain a fine balance: Don't appear arrogant or apologetic.

**Last resorts:**

Leave the situation (when it is more effective for you to leave than stay).

End the relationships (when sticking to your values outweighs the benefits of the relationship).

**What to do for additional support:**

Talk to your parents.

Have one "go to" person at school who you can talk to (the school principal, counsellor, or a teacher).

Seek support from local and online communities of trans folk and their families and allies.

**INTRODUCTION TO NEXT SESSION'S TOPIC:**

**Say:** Next week we will apply the skills we have learned to real-life challenges and we will have a chance to practice how we will respond to difficult comments and questions from others, including those about our trans sibling.

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**SESSION #7: RESPONDING TO DIFFICULT QUESTIONS AND STATEMENTS  
FROM PEERS AND ADULTS OUTSIDE OF IMMEDIATE FAMILY**

***Ice-breaker:***

- (a) State favourite thing about this past week.
- (b) State most challenging thing.

***Complete skills-teaching if unfinished. Review skills.***

***Elicit examples of questions from others who may be inquisitive, insensitive, or aggressive, with group.***

**Some examples:**

- Why does Rory use the boys' bathroom?
- Why does Rory wear dresses?
- They'll never be a real man/woman.
- Personal questions about sibling's body/surgery/sex life.

Kay (2014, p. 431): "...need to determine what, if any, explanation is needed depending on who the person is, what degree of relevance they have in the family's life, how much time they have at that moment, and their assessment of that person's receptivity."

**EXERCISE: ROLEPLAY OF DEALING WITH CHALLENGING QUESTIONS  
AND COMMENTS FROM OTHERS:**

Practice responding to challenging interpersonal scenarios in groups of two.

***(break)***

Debrief together as a group and elicit demonstrations from group members.

**DISCUSSION:**

- What was this exercise like for you?
- How do you feel when people ask you these questions?
- What helps you to deal with these questions?

**INTRODUCTION TO NEXT SESSION'S TOPIC:**

***Say:*** Next week we will focus on what your sibling's transition has been like for you.

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## **SESSION #8: GUEST SPEAKER AND CLOSING REMARKS**

### **PART 1: GUEST SPEAKER**

During the first 45 minutes of this session, a trans youth or young adult will share their personal experience of coming out to their family and beginning their transition, including changes in their relationships with their sibling(s) and in family dynamics, the role of their sibling in their process of transitioning, and how their family relationships and roles have changed since starting this transition.

Group members will then have the opportunity to share how they personally relate (or don't relate) to the speaker's experience.

The speaker will then answer any questions that group members may have.

*(break)*

### **PART 2:**

#### **OPEN-ENDED DISCUSSION: REFLECTING ON GROUP MEMBERS' EXPERIENCES OF THE CURRENT GROUP**

- (a) What was it like for you to participate in this group?
- (b) Was anything challenging during the group?
- (c) Did anything surprise you about the group? Was anything easier than you expected?
- (d) Any final thoughts?

*Facilitators thank group members for their participation and share their feedback on their experience with this group and some of what they have learned.*

#### ***SOCIALIZING AND PIZZA PARTY.***

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## **SIBLING GROUP OUTLINE:**

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## Appendix B.

### Interview Guide

*In order to encourage free-flowing and authentic conversations, the exact content, phrasing, and sequencing of the questions outlined below may vary according to participants' responses in the following interview. While the topics described in the interview guide below must be covered in each individual interview, the interviewer may select questions from the guide that best fit the respondent's previous answers, add additional questions when useful to the inquiry, and exclude questions listed in the guide if the participant's previous statements respond to the questions or sufficiently address the given interview topic.*

**The following topics will be included in the individual interviews:**

1. The individual's personal and demographic background and an introduction to their trans sibling.
2. Their attitudes and beliefs regarding gender identity, gender roles, and gender expression in society.
3. Their personal responses to their sibling's process of "coming out" or transitioning.
4. Their personal impressions of their changing roles in their family and their relationships with their trans siblings and other family members.
5. The ways in which the individual copes with distress and celebrate strengths over the course of their family members' transitions.
6. The ways in which the individual navigates difficult interactions with others outside of their family.
7. Their interest levels regarding structured support for siblings of trans individuals, including the type of programs or services they would be interested in, and what their hopes would be for these programs or services, and the time commitments they would be willing and interested in making in order to participate.

## **Introduction**

*During this interview, I will be asking you a series of questions regarding your background, your attitudes and beliefs about gender, your family roles and relationships, the experience of having a trans sibling and the family transition, and whether you would be interested in any type of program or service for siblings of trans or transitioning folk. I will be audio-recording this interview in order to transcribe the interview and analyze the data. You will have a chance to clarify the meaning of your interview statements during the “member check” meeting. Do you have any questions before we get started? Okay, I will turn the audio recording device on now.*

## **OUTLINE OF INTERVIEW QUESTIONS**

### **PART 1: Personal and family background:**

1. How did you hear about this study?
2. How old are you?
3. Where were you born? Where did you grow up?
4. Where are you currently living?
5. Who do you live with? How many siblings do you have? How old are they?
6. Tell me a little about yourself. What are your interests and hobbies?
7. (a) Does your family identify with any particular cultural or ethnic group?  
(b) To what extent do you identify with [stated cultural or ethnic group]?
8. (a) What is your home environment like, in general?  
(b) Do/did you do any activities together as a family? How often?
9. (a) Tell me a little bit about your [trans or gender nonbinary] sibling:  
(b) [If unknown]: What is their chosen pronoun? What name should we use to call them during this interview?  
(c) How old are they?  
(d) Describe their personality. What are they like?  
(e) What do they like to do? What are they interested in?  
(f) How do they define their gender identity?  
(e.g., trans-feminine/masculine, trans boy/girl, gender nonbinary, gender fluid, etc.)

10. (a) How do you refer to them? (e.g., sister, brother, sibling, something different?)
  - (b) Was this a change of words for you? When did this change?
  - (c) [If relevant]: What was this change in what you call [your sibling] like for you?
  - (d) [If relevant]: How do you feel about the word ‘sibling’?
11. (a) Tell me [more] about your relationship with [your sibling].
  - (b) How well do you get along?

**PART 2: Attitudes and beliefs regarding gender:**

1. (a) What beliefs about gender did you grow up with in your family?
  - (b) To what extent do you agree or disagree with these beliefs?
2. What are your own beliefs about gender?
3. Could you tell me a little more about your own gender identity?
3. In what ways do you think gender influences our day-to-day lives, if at all?
4. Have your views about gender been influenced in any way by [your sibling’s] gender transition?

**PART 3: Personal responses to their sibling’s process of “coming out” and transitioning:**

1. (a) When did [your trans sibling] come out as trans?
  - (b) How did they come out to you? Did you have any idea that they were trans/gender non-conforming before they came out?
  - (c) How did you respond to them coming out? What were your thoughts about them coming out? Feelings?
2. (a) What stage are they at in their process of transitioning?  
(e.g., Are they out at school/at work? To your parents? Extended family?)
  - (b) How did you respond to their gender transition? What are your thoughts about it? Feelings?
3. (a) Have your thoughts and feelings about [your sibling] coming out as trans or transitioning changed over the course of their transition? Over time? How so?
  - (b) Are there any other ways in which you feel differently now than you did when your sibling first came out or began their transition?

4. How have you been personally affected by their transition?
5. (a) What parts of this process, if any, have been most difficult for you?
  - (b) Is there anything about your sibling's transition or them being trans/gender nonbinary that you anticipate may be difficult or challenging in the future?
6. What parts of this process, if any, have been easier than expected?
7. What parts of this process, if any, have been most surprising?
8. What parts of this process, if any, has been most enjoyable?
9. Has any aspect of their coming out or transitioning brought the two of you or your family closer?

**PART 4: Personal impressions of their changing roles in their family and in their relationships with their trans sibling and other family members:**

1. (a) Has your sibling requested that you call them by a different name? Pronoun?  
*Tell me more.*
  - (b) What has this been like for you? (Was it difficult to get used to this in any way?)
  - (c) Was this difficult for you to get used to in any way?
  - (d) What about this has been most difficult for you?
2. (a) Has your relationship with your trans sibling changed since they “came out”?  
*If yes, how so?*
  - (b) Do you think about your sibling differently in any way than before they began their transition?  
*If yes, how so?*
3. Do your friends or family members treat you differently at all?
4. (a) Are there any extra roles you have taken on as a sibling since they “came out”?  
(e.g., as an ally or advocate?)  
*Please describe.*
  - (b) Are there any extra things you do as part of the family since your sibling “came out”?  
*Please describe.*
4. Have there been any changes in what activities you may expect to do with your sibling, or as a family, since your sibling began their gender transition?

5. Is there anything about your relationship with your sibling that you would like to change?
6. Is there anything about being trans or nonbinary that you don't understand? Want to learn more about?
7. Have your relationship(s) with your parent(s) changed since your sibling came out?  
*If yes, how so?*

**PART 5: The ways in which the individual copes with distress and/or celebrates strengths over the course of their sibling's or family member's transition:**

1. (a) In what ways, if any, has your sibling's gender transition been stressful for you?  
(b) How have you dealt with this personal stress? What have you done to cope with, or to manage, this stress?
2. (a) In what ways, if any, has your sibling's gender transition been stressful for your family?  
(b) Have any family conflicts or disagreements arisen relating to your sibling's gender transition?  
(c) How have you and your family dealt with this/these issues and difficulties?
3. (a) In what ways, if any, has this experience brought to light any personal strengths?  
(b) Any family strengths?  
(c) Are there any things you or your family has done to celebrate progress or strengths?
4. What are your hopes for your family as you move forward?

**PART 6: The ways in which the individual navigates difficult interactions with others outside of their family:**

1. Have there been any difficult things that other people have said to you or asked you in regard to your sibling's transition or being trans? *Please elaborate.*
2. How did you deal with this? What was it like for you?

**PART 7: The individual's own level of interest in structured support for siblings of trans folk:**

1. (a) Would you have any interest in any form of support for siblings of trans or transitioning folk, like yourself?

- (b) What kinds of support or programs or services would be most valuable or meaningful?
2. (a) [You said you may be interested in.../ Would you have any interest in] participating in a structured workshop or support group for siblings of trans or transitioning folk?
- (b) Would you have any interest in participating in a support group for siblings of trans folk?
- (c) What would you hope to get out of participating in this (workshop and/or support group)? Is there anything that you would like to learn from participating?
- (c) What would this group ideally look like? What would you like to see?
- (d) What topics would you hope to cover?
- (e) If such a group were to be organized, how would you like the group to be run?
- (f) *i.* How much time would you be willing to commit?
- ii.* How many sessions?
- iii.* How long would each session be, ideally?
- iv.* Over how many weeks?
- (g) *i.* Can you imagine anything about participating in a group for siblings and close family members of trans siblings that may be difficult or challenging?
- ii.* Any ideas about things the group leaders or facilitators could do to address these difficulties or challenges?

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