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THE ROLE OF NAME CHOICE IN THE CONSTRUCTION OF TRANSGENDER IDENTITIES*

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The University of Western Ontario

1. Introduction

A person who identifies as transgender faces many choices when it comes to negotiating the performance of their identity. Names, like clothing and physical appearance, are external representations of gender identity which may be changed during the transition process transgender individuals undergo. These changes allow them to be treated as the gender they identify with and allow them to feel more “natural” in their behaviour rather than self-conscious. Therefore it is a fundamental aspect of a transgender individual’s transition to choose a name that they believe embodies who they are at their essence.

My work examines the discourses of unitariness (Pina-Cabral 2010) in which transgender individuals describe the fit or lack of fit between their name and the ir self and essence. I consider what happens to an individual when a given name no longer represents them, or never did, leaving them asking, “is this me, is this who I am?” I argue that in order for transgender individuals to have a smooth transition the fit of the name to their essence is crucial because names are such a commonly used and public sign of gender.

This project contributes to three bodies of literature: identity performance through language, transgender identity construction, and personal names. It makes connections between the three subjects as little work has been done on the identity of transgender individuals performed through personal names. My research sheds light on a frequently misunderstood and mistreated subculture. Names are a way of connecting people; they are the first window, in many ways, to understanding a person. This research will aid in the understanding of transgender identity and how language plays a role in shaping one’s identity.

Contemporary scholars of language and identity draw on Erving Goffman’s (1959) work on “The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life”, which sets a solid base for the idea of identity as a performance. Goffman explores the way in which individuals interact day-to-day using the metaphor of the stage and performers. Goffman writes that identity is an act of performance which asks that “when an individual plays a part he “implicitly requests his observers to take seriously the impression that is fostered before them. They are asked to believe that the character they see actually possess the attributes he appears to possess” (Goffman, 1959: 17). This concept of believing one’s own performance is crucial in my research as it is what many transgender individuals strive to do with their names. Goffman’s work does not address individuals’ names but he does explore how each person in society uses everyday social situations to present themselves to others and through this they attempt to manage and control what impressions are formed. According to Goffman individuals use various techniques to maintain their performance, and their identity is shaped not only from what they do but how the audience perceives the performance and reacts to it.

Goffman’s work creates a foundation for scholars such as Judith Butler (1988), Mary Bucholtz (2004), Kira Hall (2004), Penelope Eckert (1995), Sally McConnell-Ginet (1995), and others, who look specifically at the use of language in performances of identity. Their work interweaves with the concept of gender as a social construct that is “embedded in […] aspects of social life and in the construction of other socially significant categories such as those involving
class, race, or ethnicity” (Eckert & McConnell-Ginet 1995). Many of these authors, including Judith Butler (1988), argue that gender is fluid. She claims, “gender is in no way a stable identity […] rather, it is an identity tenuously constituted in time – an identity instituted through a stylized repetition of acts” (Butler 1988: 519). Butler explains that gender is created through this stylization and repeated acts: the way one walks or dresses, the way one speaks, and even in stating one’s name. Gender is traditionally seen as binary, male and female, but Butler and other scholars assert that there is a spectrum of gender and people construct how they see others based on variations of gender along the spectrum. It is important to note, however, that while it is a good metaphor, the notion of the spectrum causes problems for some individuals. The spectrum is still ‘binary’ with men and woman at either end. While this does allow for individuals to position themselves at various spots in between, not all individuals feel that they can identify on that spectrum but rather their identity falls outside of the traditional and limited man-to-woman spectrum. Some of the gender identities that fall outside the spectrum are agender, bigender, genderqueer, third-gender, two-spirited and more (Gender Spectrum 2015). Transgender falls within the spectrum as it operates in a binary sense where someone transitions from one end to the other. While some transgender individuals may identify as genderqueer, participants used in my research described themselves as either male or female. A transgender individual in this case is someone who doesn’t identify with their assigned gender. There is a disconnect between the gender they were assigned at birth based on physical traits (assigned gender) and the gender they identify with emotionally (gender identity).

The literature on transgender focuses primarily on gender identity apart from its relationship with language. It looks at the problems individuals face with health, gender presentation and roles, pronoun usage, problems in institutional settings, etc., (Stryker 1998). The research here deals with the transgender and queer community in a broader scope. It is important to note that in Canadian and American culture there is a great importance placed on unambiguous gender identity. People find it uncomfortable and strange to not know a person’s gender. Mistakes regarding one’s gender are often highly embarrassing and emotionally laden. The importance then of the name disambiguating gender is greatly emphasized in Canadian and American culture.

Zimman and Hall (2010) discuss the nature of a “third gender” or “third sex” which are “groups whose gender identities and enactments fall outside of socio-cultural norms” (Zimman and Hall 2010: 166). They situate their work also in language and identity but focus on identities that don’t necessarily fall within the male to female spectrum. Gender identity is the focus of my paper because it is the assigned gender that transgender individuals do not feel they align with, therefore they are looking to perform a different gender identity which they describe as being more “natural” or “true”. Viviane Namaste (2005) discusses gender and identity in regards to the queer community; her work specifically looks at transgender issues regarding sex change, social change and identity. Her work deals with the issues transgender individuals face in an institutional setting, for example, one issue she touches on that holds relevance to my research is social erasure and making transgender people invisible. This comes often in a lack of respect shown towards a transgender individual’s preferred name or pronoun, ignoring that they are trying to identify as their true self and in a sense ignoring that true identity.

The research on names comes primarily from João de Pina-Cabral’s work (2010) which explores the fact that some people “may be called by names which they do not agree to, names which they do not recognize, or names which they do not appreciate” (Pina-Cabral 2010: 5), for example transgender individuals who are not called by a name they identify with. Pina-Cabral (2010) discusses the essence of a “true name”. This notion suggests that there is a name that fits an essence of who they truly are, often associated with this is a feeling of ‘this is me’. While Pina-Cabral’s work focuses on Portuguese speakers my work explores that ideology in the discourse of transgender individuals. For some people the concept of their name fitting their true self is never questioned; their name fits who they are. For others, there is a discord between their name and who they are. This is often the case for transgender individuals, resulting in a search to find a name that
fits their true essence. They explain that by taking on this new name then, this new persona, they are able to perform a new identity as if it were a natural performance rather than forced.

Pina-Cabral analyzes the use of “nicknames, abbreviations, diminutives, pseudonyms, hypocoristic, and so on” (Pina-Cabral 2010: 5) in specific Portuguese speaking communities. Pina-Cabral found that often times people would produce “phrases like, “Yes, they call me X, but my true name is Y”” (Pina-Cabral 2010: 5), thus he conceived this notion of truth and that what is at stake is not the name itself, or the naming process but the way the name reflects the individual. Most importantly, it is the way the name reflects the soul. Pina-Cabral argues that “the person’s essence is somehow integral and unitary” and that “the given name today is still the name of the person’s essence” (Pina-Cabral 2010: 8). Pina-Cabral examines the aspect of language in identity construction, stating that “self-building is both a condition for language and a result of language. People start working on their own personhood as they enter language.” (Pina-Cabral 2015: 2).

There is the notion that a name is tied to personhood and that self-building, or the construction identity is a result of language. Pina-Cabral’s work looks specifically at Portuguese speakers. As mentioned this differs from my own work. The transgender discourse does not agree with the Portuguese speakers on the point of subject hood because the transgender individuals do not believe their baptismal or legal first given is their “true name”, rather they are searching for their true name. For transgender individuals the condition of unitariness is the single most important truth condition.

My research also uses Richard Alford’s work (1988) on names, which is a base for many scholars. He explores topics in naming practices, name meaningfulness, name changes, fixed and negotiable identities, as well as differences in American naming practices and those of other cultures. These broad topics of Alford’s are explored using his own data on names and he offers a comprehensible and solid base in which to ground my own research, as I also look at naming practices, meaning and name changes. Alford’s work on name changes and the power of a name change is important to my own work as I explore the name change that transgender individuals make.

Charlotte Hagström (2012: 81) explains “a person’s own name is important because it distinguishes [them] as a unique person and identifies [them] as [themselves]” and “we use names to gain knowledge about who a person ‘is’”. Names as an essential aspect of social identity play a large role in perceptions of gender. As such a significant part of identity it becomes important to figure out the process in which individuals assign identity value to their name. Hagström’s work also offers a good insight into the way names play a role in shaping our identity. Hagström has worked with names for several projects and explores the connection personal names have with identity. Her work reflects on “the link between name and self” and continues “a discussion of how names are used to culturally structure our surroundings and interpret the world” (Hagström 2012: 1). Her work deals with the virtual world in which users must choose an online identity for themselves in areas such as “online games, chat rooms and web communities” (Hagström 2012: 1). This ties in neatly with my own work as it is giving users a chance to choose for themselves a name under which they want to identify when they approach the virtual world. Hagström’s work explores the way in which users are given a chance to create a new virtual identity expressed through an online name, and how that name becomes who they are. The name is a crucial aspect of their online identity and marks the birth of their online presence. The same ideas were found in my own work. The name for transgender individuals becomes symbolic of marking the change from their old identity to their new. There are similarities between her work in the virtual world and my own in which transgender individuals seek to find a name under which they can identify and face the world.

Vom Bruck and Bodenhorn also explore the power of names and their role in society as the “potential for [a] name to become identical with [a] person, [creating] the simultaneous potential to fix them as individuals and as members of recognized social groups” (vom Bruck and Bodenhorn 2006: 4). They argue the same aspects of social membership that Alford puts forward in his work and they agree with other scholars (Hagström 2012, Alford 1988, Pina-Cabral 2010, 2015) that
names reveal crucial bits of information about the person who holds that name such as “gender, kinship, geographical origin, or religion” (vom Bruck and Bodenhorn 2006: 4-5).

This paper investigates the significance of re-naming oneself during the process of transitioning, amongst transgender individuals. I describe what steps and methods they take to find a name that suits them, and analyze the discourses of unitariness in which they talk about how they search for a name that is truly them at their essence. The paper examines the extent to which they take into consideration family or friend’s input as well as how they may view and index other names. I claim that a fundamental aspect of the transition process for transgender individuals lies in choosing and embodying their new name because of the ways in which names and gender are both considered to be essential aspects of social identities. By choosing a name they are able to empower themselves and perform their identity as they wish. In the next section, I describe the methods of data collection and analysis used for this research.

2. Methodology

Due to the sensitive and personal nature of this topic personal data gathered from interviewees are limited to only names with a focus on the first name. The bulk of my data come from personal interviews conducted in person or via online messaging and call services such as Skype and Google Talk. Participants for interviews were recruited through posters in public places, such as London’s Cross Cultural Learning Centre (CCLC), and through web announcements on sites such as Facebook. It was through the CCLC that I was able to attend a Transgender Awareness meeting. Here I was able to understand more about the issues the transgender community faces within my own community. This tied in with the literature I was reading along with my own data, allowing me to have a solid base with which to ground my research.

The interviews were conducted with ten transgender individuals from both Canada and the United States. The interviewees are a mix between female to male (FTM) and male to female (MTF) participants. Five participants are female to male transgender; five participants are male to female. Interviewees range in age from twenty to late fifties. The interview participants are listed in Table 1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>NAME</th>
<th>AGE RANGE</th>
<th>TRANSITION</th>
<th>Preferred PRONOUN</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Alice Marie</td>
<td>25-30</td>
<td>MTF</td>
<td>She</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alice Scout</td>
<td>20-25</td>
<td>MTF</td>
<td>She</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anna Henry</td>
<td>50-55</td>
<td>MTF</td>
<td>She</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Holly</td>
<td>35-40</td>
<td>MTF</td>
<td>She</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manna</td>
<td>20-25</td>
<td>MTF</td>
<td>They</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethan</td>
<td>20-25</td>
<td>FTM</td>
<td>He</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evan</td>
<td>20-25</td>
<td>FTM</td>
<td>He</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Finley</td>
<td>20-25</td>
<td>FTM</td>
<td>He</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Justin</td>
<td>20-25</td>
<td>FTM</td>
<td>He</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peter</td>
<td>20-25</td>
<td>FTM</td>
<td>He</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The interviewees were asked a series of open-ended questions concerning their choices regarding their name and their subjective interpretations of the names. The questions explored the name change process and the experiences they had with it. A focal point of my analyses were narratives describing a feeling and statement of “this is me”. These narratives deal with the individual’s personal feeling of a connection to their name and identity. Each interviewee provided several narratives on what sort of situations they were faced with while changing their name and
the experiences they had when introducing their new name to certain social groups, for example, co-workers, professors, or students in school and business administrations.

My data are also coded into narratives regarding the name changing process. These are divided into several groups. The first is social practice, examining both external relations with family, friends, and others and also internal with one’s own thoughts regarding one’s name in a social sphere. These narratives explore acceptance and the part it plays in shaping their name choice. It is important that transgender individuals’ names represent their identity and since social acceptance plays a large role in identity, these narratives provide valuable insight into the social role of identity construction. Second, I grouped narratives about transitioning. These narratives discuss when in their transition process they are most likely to consider name changes and when they are most likely to put that name change into effect. These narratives are important to my research as they show the importance a name has in empowering individuals. This leads into narratives about indexicality and whether they look for masculine or feminine names, names that relate to their age and, ethnicity and what it was about the name that drew them to it. This also relates to methods used by transgender individuals to find their name. The third category of narratives is that on ideologies and the issues transgender individuals faced with business, academic, or government situations when changing their name.

Along with personal interviews some data for this study are derived from a number of postings on publically accessible forums: Reddit and Susan’s Place. Reddit is a free forum allowing anyone to join and submit entries. Launched in 2005, it began as a site for social news that displays stories based on the user’s personal preference, which is determined by a voting system in which users can vote posts up or down. In 2008, Reddit allowed users to begin to create ‘subreddits’, also known as communities, opening up more freedom for users to post on various topics in a more organized manner.

Reddit is a privately owned company, like Facebook, though statistics on its demographics and users were a little harder to come by. In order to better understand the data, I have included some of the statistics about the site to allow for a rough idea of who the users are. Reddit has 2.89 billion users from 196 countries. The largest demographic of this are males ages eighteen to twenty-nine, this makes up fifteen percent of the demographic. There are 48.5 million visitors yearly to Reddit from the United States alone. These stats were taken from Crunchbase (‘Reddit edit’, 2014) and Expanded Ramblings (‘DMR’, 2014), two websites that compile lists of stats regarding other businesses. Knowing these stats allow me to better understand which demographic my data my becoming from. Of course it is not possible to know specifically who each user but is it does provide a rough idea.

The subreddit which I have collected data from is called “FTM” which stands for “For the men” in their community but is a play on the standard “FTM” which means “Female to Male” an acronym used in the transgender community to show their transition. The focus of this community is transgender men but the community is open to all. The particular thread I am using is called “How did you find your name? I'm waiting for that flash of inspiration...”. All the data from Reddit come from transgender males – this is assumed because those on the forum self-declare in their posts before they speak that they are transgender males; they are also discussing masculine names and posting in the FTM section. The most likely age range that these individuals are in is between the ages eighteen to thirty (based on Reddit stats), although race and age are unknown.

Susan’s Place is a website for the transgender community and was created in 1995. Known was “The World's Largest Peer Support Website for Transgender Individuals” (Larson, 1995), its purpose is to provide an open community in which individuals can feel safe and find the resources needed. It contains any news items regarding transgender people but is also contains a database of transgender related websites. The website is also contains a chat and forum open for discussing any transgender related issues. From the forum I have several threads on name choices (being what is common or uncommon for transgender) and name changes (the personal stories people offer). The threads are: “Becoming more and more sure” started in August 2006, “Most transgendered name”
started in July 2011, “yo transitioning people! (names etc.)” started in June 2005, and “Names For Different Genders Sides” started June 2006. As this is a public forum members can remain anonymous. Susan’s Place has 18,000 members and as these threads are general audience not specific to FTM or MTF I cannot say for certain how many are transgender male or female. Their age and ethnicity also is undeterminable.

3. Analysis

3.1 Empowering Ourselves

A name is not often something many think about. It is something that has been given at birth and it is something everyone carries with them their whole lives. Some may dislike their name or some may struggle with it but for many people that is the extent of it. A dislike for it sparks the need to be called by a nickname but rarely does one think to change their entire name. For a transgender individual however a nickname is inadequate. For a transgender individual their name is not tied to their identity but rather to a gender identity that they do not identify with.

This disconnect between their given name and their identity lies in the fact that their given name is often given to match their assigned gender. Names in many cultures are often gendered; we have boy names and girl names. For transgender people the name that aligns with their assigned gender does not match with their gender identity.

Not having that connection with their name is difficult for transgender individuals. Names are a valuable part of identity, and “to have your own name questioned is to be questioned as a person” (Hagström 2012: 82). Names provide people with information and a means of forming an opinion about who a person is; whether we are looking right at them as they give us their name or whether we overhear it, a name indexes a lot about a person. Goffman explains that as people perform for the audience, others interacting with the person “can glean clues from his conduct and appearance which allow them to apply their previous experiences with individuals roughly similar to the one before them” and “apply untested stereotypes to him” (Goffman 1959: 13). Similarly the same happens with individuals’ personal names. Certain names invoke certain ethnic backgrounds, religious and racial; others invoke certain age groups, or perhaps even social classes. Hagström states that her informants frequently mention, “it does not matter what you are called, it is what you do and say that counts” and she says:

“most people would probably agree this is how it should be. Whether you are called Jutta or Joline, Pierre or Pentti you should not be judged, treated or measured differently. But that is not how it is. Based on our preconceived notions about other’s people’s names we draw conclusions about their gender, age, ethnicity, nationality, social positions, and maybe even religious beliefs. The “name fact” influences our behaviour and attitude towards them as well as our expectation of their attitude towards us. From this follows that it does matter what you are called.” (Hagström 2012: 83)

A name is arguably very important to the way people are treated. A name becomes a source of empowerment to allow us to be who we want to be.

As a way of empowering an individual a name becomes a very important aspect of the transition amongst transgender individuals. They describe an intense attachment to their name once they have found it. This feeling of a perfect fit with their name is because that name now allows them to embody their gender identity and perform it publicly. It empowers them to perform their “true” identity and to present it to the world. A very recent and public example of this is Caitlyn Jenner, formally known as Bruce Jenner. The Vanity Fair cover that came out with Caitlyn’s transition had the title “Call me Caitlyn” sprawled out across it. Caitlyn’s name had been kept a secret until this grand reveal. The grand reveal of her name on the cover of a magazine and in a public interview was the final step of her transformation. For Caitlyn she could finally say “Call
me Caitlyn”; this is who she is and this is how she wants to be addressed. Caitlyn’s ability to say “Call me Caitlyn” is showing the world that this is who she is. By using her name and by stating it out there across the media it becomes a very open declaration using the discourse of “this is who I am”, and “this is how I want you to perceive me”.

Jenner’s situation is very different than the transgender individuals I spoke with. Jenner is situated already in the media from past Olympic fame and the reality television show she is a part of. For Jenner there was a lot of fanfare and publicity involving how she came out. For many transgender individuals this is not the case and unlike Jenner there are many who are not able to afford to have the surgeries, or the stylists to make such a drastic physical change. Jenner was able to come out as one completely changed package and did not share her name with the public until the whole package was completely ready. Based on my data this is not the norm. Not all transgender individuals have the ability to do what Jenner did, and so for them, the name becomes the first step. It is the first step because a name holds a significant aspect of identity; a name works as “identifiers, confirming the identity of the people they represent” (Emmelhainz 2012: 171). Beyond simply being an identifier though a name also constructs our identity. For transgender individuals who, unlike Caitlyn Jenner, cannot afford to make the physical changes or have the option to undergo the physical changes, finding and implementing the use of a name that reflects who they are at their core becomes crucial for them to not only empower themselves but introduce themselves to the world around them.

A name is a source of empowerment because names allow for an individual to detach themselves from an old identity and perform under a new one. Vom Bruck and Bodenhorn explain: “The power of the name itself, which varies cross-culturally, often thus plays a critical role in social life. An acknowledgment of this introduces an important of recognized social groups. It is their detachability that renders names a powerful political tool for establishing or erasing formal identity, and gives them commodity-like value. And it is precisely their detachability that allows them to cross boundaries” (vom Bruck and Bodenhorn 2006: 3-4) Names allow for erasing or establishing a formal identity and they provide membership into society, therefore they work as powerful tool of empowerment to allow the transgender individual to take the step into establishing their new identity and membership into society as they cross over gender boundaries.

With a name that reflects their gender identity, they can say, “this is who I am, regardless of how I look”. This is evident not only in my data but in a social media trend that sparked from the cover title “Call me Caitlyn”. A hashtag was started called #MyVanityFairCover, where transgender individuals took and posted photos of themselves putting the Vanity Fair title on it and “Call me ______”. They then filled in the blank with their own name. See Figures 1 and 2. This artistic act gives voice to other transgender individuals who cannot afford a complete makeover like Jenner and so their physical appearance does not look always identifiably male or female. The marker of their identity is their name.
In my own research the same thing is evident; a name for transgender individuals becomes a one of the first things they consider in their transition. There is also a powerful feeling of self-discovery when they find their name and once they have found their name they become very attached to it.

3.2 This is ME

To be transgender is to have a feeling of disconnect between the gender one was assigned at birth and the gender one identifies with. This disconnect causes transgender individuals to seek other ways to express the gender that they describe as feeling more natural. When they make the steps to this new gender expression there is a jarring incongruence between their birth name and their identity. As explained before by Pina-Cabral, individuals “may be called by names which they do not agree to, names which they do not recognize, or names which they do not appreciate” (Pina-Cabral 2010: 5). Their birth name, whether it fits their gender or doesn’t, is their old self and they wish to find the self that is locked inside of them; that is, who they wish to perform. They wish to perform who they are, at their essence. Pina-Cabral (2010) describes finding and using a “true name” as one that captures and embodies that essence. For transgender individuals when they find this name it becomes an almost instantaneous “yes this is it, this is me” moment. In my research, the ten participants expressed a feeling of connecting with a name. From the forum data the majority of people who had already decided on a name also expressed a strong connection to their name and this “ah ha that is me” moment.

Several examples from my data show quite clearly this moment of discovery and deciding on a name. The first is an interviewee who struggled for some time to find a name for herself. Having been given the task of choosing a name as homework by her therapist she was certain it wouldn’t
take more than a few weeks. Months went by and she admits it was rather discouraging not finding her name for so long but not just any name would do. She had tried other names before but due to circumstances didn’t keep with those names and nothing felt right, that was until she stumbled across her name playing a game.

(1) Holly: Until one day, things fell together. I was playing World of Warcraft as my Paladin. I got a private message from someone looking for a healer for their group. But as fate had it, there was a typo in the message. Instead of asking if I was Holy, he asked, "Are you Holly?" I stared at it strangely for several minutes. I wasn't a Holy Paladin, but yet I identified with this for reasons I couldn't explain. I was Holly. (Holly Interview, 2014)

Seen in Holly’s example, there is this moment of staring at her name and this moment recognizing that what she was looking at was her name. In fact Holly admits to there being no reason why she identified with it; it had never been considered in her list before when she attempted to find a name through various methods. It didn’t matter though, she was Holly.

Holly takes on that very strong yet powerful sentence, “I was Holly”. That name represents who she is at her core. It is what she identifies as and it allows her to become empowered, to become confident. Finding that connection with one’s essence also invokes feeling of comfortableness and certainty.

(2) When I finally reached a name I felt comfortable with, I gave it a last test run with my close friends. They transitioned to it well and came up with nicknames on their own! When they called out to me, it felt like they were finally calling out to me. That's when I knew this was going to be my name. I felt comfortable with it. (Senor_Potato, Reddit)

Example 2 is from the Reddit forum, from a user who goes by the user name Senor_Potato, expressing here this idea that a new name is comfortable. It was something not only was he comfortable with but it transitioned easily amongst his friends. Most importantly though, Senor_Potato had found a name that called out to him. He said “when they called out to me, it felt like they were finally calling out to me”. The name he found and is using is who he is. By using that name the individual now feels “seen and recognized: [they] are not just another person in the crowd. […] Someone] sees what [they] do and it is [their] performance that is approved. This makes a difference when it comes to building up self-esteem and confidence” (Hagström 2012: 2). That name not only allows them to act more confidently in their performance but it allows them to find approval.

Finn from the interviews also gives a similar narrative. He touches on it in two parts. Part A in example 3 describes the feeling that the name was just “more of an expression” of who they were and part B shows that discourse of “this is it, this is me”.

(3) a. Finn: And then I went by Dar for a while I don’t remember why I think it was from like Dar which is an Irish name um yeah and then I was going by that for a while and then I just kept like looking at names and I found Finn and I thought that was just that was more of an expression of myself so

b. Finn: Worked for the [University] call center and so I was just like just a lot of time when you're working there cause you don’t do a lot so I was like researching times on my phone or whatever and yeah I came across Finn I was like Finn and they were like Finn and we’re all like yes Finn (Finn Interview, 2014)

Finn had a connection to his name like many other participants I’ve spoken to. On the Reddit forum as I mentioned many of the commenters spoke also of a connection to their name, not just
Senor_Potato. Another user employs a discourse of unitariness, using words like “resonate” and “clicked”:

(4) I overheard a name not on my lists (Evan) on one of my mom's crazy reality TV shows and it just resonated. I didn’t know for sure at first that I had the right name. I just knew that it met my requirements- short like my birth name, somewhat common during my birth year, and it clicked. So I stuck with it through my doubt, and now I can't imagine being called anything else. (tosschuckthrow, Reddit)

As evidenced by these examples it is clear that the right name is one that resonates with an individual. It’s just not just about finding a name you like, it’s about finding a name that fits your identity. In example 4 the user on Reddit, like Holly, explains that the name wasn’t even on one of his lists. It was a name that he had never considered before but when he heard it, it resonated with him. Like Holly when she first saw her name on the screen in the game she was playing, it clicked. One might argue that the name chooses the individual.

Another interviewee speaks of his experience finally using his name for the first time: “was called Ethan the whole time. It was surreal, but it also kind of felt like it fit. I think next time it'll feel more natural. I suppose if I'd chosen wrong it would have felt differently” (Ethan Interview, 2015). There is this very strong idea that the name strikes who they are at your essence; it is about how they feel with it, that feeling of “this fits” and “this is me”.

3.3. Ownership

Another aspect from my data that provides evidence to the fact that a name is empowering one’s sense of self-identity is the fact that once a transgender individual has decided on a name they own it. It becomes theirs and there is nothing that can change their mind about that particular name. While the process of finding a name may involve social interaction and opinions on the name, once they found the name they were so connected to it that it no longer mattered to them the opinions of others; they had found the name they could identify with. As one participant explains it:

(5) “There wasn’t really anyone who gave me a hard time but if they did I would just be like okay fuck you like I don’t care I literally don’t care enough about you cause I know I knew my friends were going to be fine so it’s just like if anyone has problem I’ll just be like no just I’m never going to see you again because I don’t care about you” (Finn Interview, 2014)

A similar sentiment is shown in from the user Senor_Potato expressing that:

(6) “As soon as I got used to it, it was mine. I don't care if I knew someone who has the same name or that it's not too common. It's mine now and no one can take it.” (Senor_Potato, Reddit)

They talk about how the name becomes theirs like a possession. It is part of who they are. It is a name they feel they can embody naturally, there is no more disconnect between who they feel they are inside and how they present themselves. For them the name has become an integral part of who they are. They are no longer asking themselves, “Is this me?” but they have instead found an answer to the question “who are you?”

We see the same in Holly’s story as well. Holly explains:
Despite the fact that she received, on occasion, people trying to talk her out of it, or even negative remarks about what the name indexes for them, Holly refuses to back down. Others might not feel like the name is her but to Holly it stuck. That was her name and regardless of what people think it belongs to her and it fits who she is at her core.

3.4 Searching for a Name

The search for a name can be a short or long process as it varies for each individual. This section describes the ways in which individuals begin the process of finding their name. There are a number of significant patterns I have found in my research regarding this process. As the name is such a vital part of an individual’s identity it is important to discuss who they consulted about it, what factors played a part in deciding on a name, but also the issues that they faced and how any issues may have played a role in their search for a name.

The practice of choosing a name is a highly performative act and it “[effects] change in the world through language” (Bucholtz and Hall 2004). The change they are bringing into effect is their change in identity, their change in gender. Identifying with a gender also means performing it, the “production of gender – or any identity – thus depends crucially on ideology to render that identity as recognizable and legitimate” (Bucholtz and Hall 2004). That is to say that performing a gender and taking a name – the performative act of renaming oneself – is dependent on people’s views of names, on people’s ideologies. It is not surprising that in choosing a new name transgender people look to others to help with the transition and performance of their preferred gender identity. Along with deciding on their new name and gender expression is the public performance of these. What is often seen in the narrations that I have collected is a transgender individual will first try out the name and use that name for a little while to see how others react to them. The process of finding a name then relies on social interference from friends or family, practice performing, questions about what that name represents and indexes along with the masculinity or femininity of the name.

In order to demonstrate the methods participants use throughout the process of choosing a name, I will provide a few examples from both online forums and in person interviews. The first example is from a Reddit post, by user Senor_Potato.

(8) a. I never picked my name, I allowed my family to do it. I tried asking them what they would have named me if I was born a cismale, but the name they came up with turned out to be my brother's name!

b. Although my father was completely against it and chose to have no part in the name choosing, I allowed to have my other immediate family do it. They decided on a name that'd be easy to transition into--one they won't confuse too many times. Since my birth name started with a J, they decided to stick with that.

c. It took a few months for them to come up with names and bring it up to me by calling me out by that. I tried some out, wore it around a bit, and decided to throw it or keep it. I felt like I was trying on a new outfit--one without the ruffles or odd patterns but one that felt right. (Senor_Potato, Reddit)

For this user and many others the process of finding a name included staying with a name that used the first letter of their name given at birth – another commonly offered piece of advice to
transgender individual seeking to change their name. Oftentimes transgender individuals are looking for something which they consider “easy” to transition into. For many this generally means a name that is similar to their birth name, either by simply taking the masculine or feminine form of it or perhaps by choosing a name that has the same number of syllables or sounds similar, or even begins with the same letter. Occasionally it may not be an aesthetic choice. As kaiausgustus, another forum user, mentions in his post “My first name needed to have the same initial as my birth certificate first name, since I go by my first initial and last name for publications in my field of work”. There are many times a person’s name cannot change so drastically if they’ve already established themselves with their old name – a transgender individual runs into many troubles besides name changes during transition, such as difficulties with academic administration or job related issues.

Another example from my data shows the same idea. Holly kept her birth name’s original initial and used it for a middle name.

(9) Holly: As you probably noticed, my email address had a middle initial N. I kept that from Neal, but there's a bit more to that as well. For about 4 years (2000-2004), I worked at Best Buy as a sales person. [...] One day, I forgot my name tag at home, and borrowed a spare one that floated around the store for just such occasions. It had the name Nick. My Sales Manager saw me wearing the name tag, didn't know it wasn't my real name, and noted my sales for the day lead the store. At the closing meeting, she praised "Nick" for having a great day. Everyone had a bit of a chuckle because they knew my real name. But I kept the name tag and used it to separate myself from my work. So when I needed a middle initial for Gmail, because all the other derivatives of Holly [last name] were taken, I kept the N but thought I might use something like Nichole. (Holly Interview, 2014)

Holly talks about keeping the middle name because of email issues, and how it was important to keep her name separate for a work identity and her personal identity. Later Holly continues to explain that she used both a male and female identity as it was not easy for a female to work in her field and she had more respect as a man. Therefore she continued to use a male identity and use a masculine name to better interact with her clients. This isn’t uncommon and in my data, several posters said keeping their name close or similar to their birth name was necessary because of the identity they had already created for themselves. One poster even mentioned it was necessary for him to maintain his birth name somewhere in his name to abide by family traditions or else risk being written out of the will – he also mentioned, however, that as soon as he could he would change his name (once the person who wrote the will had passed away). So, while it is necessary for some to keep their name for legal purposes or for ease of their work and life there are some who still wish to change it completely. In the second part of example 8, we see that Senor_Potato mentioned briefly what I have examined; the ease of transitioning to a name that has the same first letter of their birth name. This is because of a reaction from those around them; Senor_Potato ended up having his father not wish to participate in the renaming because he did not agree with his choice. Keeping parents involved or similar names was also a common theme among the data I analyzed.

In example 8A: “I never picked my name, I allowed my family to do it. I tried asking them what they would have named me if I was born a cismale, but the name they came up with turned out to be my brother's name”, we see that the author has given part of the process of naming themselves to their family. The user states they never picked it, suggesting that the process was entirely their family’s choice. Among English-speaking North Americans, it is customary that the parents name their children. Alford states that “name bestowal in the U.S. also indicated parenthood” (Alford 1988: 124) along with membership to society for the child, and it is a way of parents to claim that they are parents. Many transgender individuals I have spoken with often attempt if possible to allow their parents to have some opinion in the renaming process. This may
be because “name changes [...] become a point of contestation between parents and children especially when parents have taken care in choosing the “right” name for their child’s person, social situation, or future” (Emmelhainz 2012: 173). The process of transition already causes some contestation that allowing a parent to provide input may help lessen this with the understanding that name bestowal is often a parental process. Transgender individuals return to their parents for opinions on new names as a way to include their parents in their figurative rebirth. This varies as many transgender individuals do not have parental support, in example 8B Senor_Potato mentions this about his father. Another example is from Reddit is from user lost-angle:

(10) For my middle name, I wanted to respect my parents as much as possible. I thought of just leaving it as the female name I was given, Christine, but decided to masculinize it. It came down to "Christopher" or "Christian." I’ve decided on Christian because the meaning of the name is the same. (lost-angle, Reddit)

lost-angle is stating quite openly that he wants to respect his parents, and did so by keeping his birth name in his new name as a middle name and masculinizing it.

It was actually encouraged among the group on Reddit to include parents, if one had a positive relationship with them, kaiaugustus also posted that “one of the advantages of this approach is that your parents will also feel like they're being included. I think a lot of parents fear that their kid coming out as trans* means that the kid also feels like the parents raised them wrong (I know I don't feel that way)”. The idea that identity is socially constructed is brought to light here.

Mary Bucholtz (2011) discusses how “social interaction is the most immediate site for the construction of identity”. Unsurprisingly, transgender individuals do not simply choose a name by themselves. In every post and in the interview there is reference to interaction with other people, either by asking them to choose a name or by asking their opinions on a chosen name. In example 8C:

“It took a few months for them to come up with names and bring it up to me by calling me out by that. I tried some out, wore it around a bit, and decided to throw it or keep it. I felt like I was trying on a new outfit--one without the ruffles or odd patterns but one that felt right.”

(Senor_Potato, Reddit)

We see part of the name choosing process is trying out an identity, this is also done by including social interaction in the process. The individuals in the data set are putting their new identity to the test before deciding if it is who they want to be or if it is perceived and accepted as they hope it might be. Senor_Potato likens it to trying on clothes: it is an external representation of their identity. Names provide a twofold function, they are not only an external but internal representation, “names identify a person inwardly and outwardly, by acting as labels for social and [self-identification]” (Emmelhainz 2012, 171). This trial period of names is common; the majority of posters on Reddit mentioned trying out various names for a few days or weeks, tosschuckthrow says “I drove my family/friends crazy for months, and even introduced myself to strangers with different names to try them out”.

In fact one of the most common ways transgender individuals go about searching for a name for themselves is to create a list or try out various names. One of my interviewees was kind enough to provide for me a list of names seen here in example 11 (the list is taken directly from her computer, italics and asterisk are her own markings):

(11) Alice: I had a list of prospective names, I have it in my notes if you want. I had reasons for each one, and Alice was one of my favourites and my friends.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>FIRST NAMES:</th>
<th>MIDDLE NAMES:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Marquise *</td>
<td>Marie ne</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alice Marie Chambers *</td>
<td>Kailey b</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Allison</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
As one can see Alice has not only created a list of names but Alice has given the list of names to her friends in order to seek their input; friends Natalie, Brett and Emily have all voices on middle names for Alice. The process of creating a list often comes first in an individual’s quest to find a new name because it allows them to compile names they think they might like. It is a way for them to begin to explore their identity and discover what fits them.

Identity is also situated not only by gender but race and age. Celia Emmelhainz (2012) mentions in their work that Leonard Ashley (1996) suggests that names can convey range of social values serving for individuals as:

“scripts for their lives, expressions of beliefs and expectations of their parents, clues to where they fit into society, and what their duties are. Names are human artifacts that can tell us much about the namers’ beliefs about religion and magic, social order, what parents want from their children, how they seem to value males over females, and how the members of society regard the word in which they live. In short, names are full of historical and cultural, and sociological information” (Ashley 1993: 31).

Names provide a great deal of information and index a great deal of ideas on the name bearer. It is important to a transgender individual seeking a name that a name meet certain requirements.

Many of those on the forums posting about their name change spoke of requirements. tosschuckthrow, untiltheygo, and drummingbooming all spoke of certain requirements that many others on the forums agreed with when choosing a new name. These requirements for choosing a new identity usually kept a link to the identity they already had such as ethnicity or age. For example, with age it was important to consider a name that was somewhat common during their birth year.

One interview explains their process for finding a name in which birth year is important.

(12) Anna: Okay, well, first I was going for names that were uh, matching my initials. I tried to make them common names because I don’t really want to stick out by having […] one that’s not really in use now, or another name like a stripper name or something like that so I was kind of careful about something like that, so that’s why I came up with the first one they were just sort of common names that go with that but I didn’t really like that so for the other one I looked at other names that was a longer process. I looked at names that were kind of common around the year I was born so that I didn’t stick out and then it was just what names would have personal meaning to me so um actually the names I ended up choosing were both related to songs. (Anna Interview, 2014)

Anna also mentions matching initials but in this example we also see the importance of finding names that wouldn’t have her stick out, or be related to a stripper’s name. To find a name that doesn’t stick out Anna talks about looking at names that were common around the year she was born. This notion of not wanting to stick out is important in many of the narratives I have collected. They want a name that will allow them to smoothly and as subtly as possible transition into their new gender identity. Being transgender already makes them marked persons amongst others, so it is important to them that their name allow for a smooth and subtle transition.
One poster, untiltheygo, gives an example of what happens when the new name doesn’t follow such a format: “Kevin was an appalling choice of name; it jars for many when it turns out I'm not a working-class man from the 1980s”. Kevin is, according to untiltheygo, a name that indexes a masculine identity, and specifically it is a working class man from the 1980s. It not only indexes gender but age and social class as well. This is not something the owner of the name can control; it is a part of the social construction that creates identity. Oftentimes there are general ideas about names that are subjective to people but can have common ideologies associated with them. Many transgender individuals I have spoken with often associated Dave with an ‘average joe’ identity and a common transgender name. The name Dave was mentioned both in the forums and in the interviews. In an excerpt from the interview we see how the interviewee, Finn, tried out Dave as a name.

(13) Finn: I went by quite a few names before I settled on my name first when I was sort of when I first was seriously considering changing my name well seriously but [sigh] when I wanted a different name the first name that I started to go by was Dave actually and I was fine with that (?) That was fine but there are a lot of Daves and it was just like confusing a lot of the times and it was just inconvenient and also didn’t well I mean it wasn’t that it didn’t fit but it was more that like I don’t know it wasn’t the name for me (Finn Interview, 2014).

In example 13 there is more evidence of having tried out a name prior to selecting a new name. Finn actually spent a long time using other names before finding Finn. His method was also to make lists, like many others, and to test out the names on friends or in general. As seen here Finn’s response to Dave was that there were a lot of people already named Dave, it is a common name in the age group of the individuals in the data set. Having a common name was confusing and inconvenient, untiltheygo also comments on how “at a party full of Daves and Mikes, it can be nice to be unique”. In fact one poster on the forum strongly suggests to other users to avoid the top ten names of your birth year or top ten transgender names.

While it’s important to consider the birth name and to find a name that is not overly common but at the same time not too unique it is also important to individuals that they find a name that indexes how they wish to be perceived. Goffman states that there is an “expected consistency between appearance and manner” (Goffman 1959: 25); the same can be said for one’s appearance, the way one acts and their name. As such, a name should index properly the appearance and manner which the individual wants to perform. Two of my interviewees give an example of how they want their name to index properly the performance they desire to give, how they view themselves, and how they wish others to view them.

(14) Anna: I was also trying to find a name that, I am sort of shy and I not super aggressive so I wanted a name kind of reflected that and it was a softer name and I found it actually made people treat me different than Brenda did
AV: really
Anna: yes
AV: can you explain a little more
Anna: like just a subtle shift I mean basically and this is what a couple people told me when I changed the name that they thought it was more appropriate Brenda, the Brenda just seemed more of an aggressive name I guess well aggressive is probably not right word but it just brought to mind a louder kind of thing than Anna seems kind of soft and people take it as softer. (Anna Interview, 2014)

Anna wanted to portray herself as softer, she views herself as a shy individual and the performance she gives is quieter, in order to complete this performance she wants to find a name
that will fit her appearance, and her manner, for that she decides Brenda is not appropriate but Anna will work better. Another example of this concept is by interviewee Holly, who speaks about the connotations certain names bear and how they didn’t match her identity.

(15) Holly: When I was young, I had several names I like from characters in games. One of the games, Quest for Glory IV, had a character named Katrina. I never came out to anyone until I was 24, so I had a lot of time to try get used to the idea of the name. The character was strong, independent, powerful, a little dark, but still caring. I really identified as her. In 2001, my mother moved down to the New Orleans area. She still lived there in 2005 when Hurricane Katrina devastated the area. After that, I felt that I couldn't identify with the name anymore because of the connotation that was attached with it. (Holly Interview, 2015)

Holly wanted to portray a strong, independent and powerful person. The name Katrina was something she identified with at first because it, in her opinion, invoked the idea of a woman who shared the characteristics Holly saw in herself. There was a shift in the connotation of the name however after the hurricane and Holly was left to continue searching for a name. She mentioned several others she considered though based on the feeling they invoked. It’s very important the name align with how the individual views themselves and the performance of identity they are desiring to give.

Another factor to consider when choosing a name is ethnicity. Reddit user baseballfan1107 says:

“I just picked my name only a couple months ago. I considered many names before I picked Dmitry to be my name. I'm of eastern European descent and my heritage is important to me, so I wanted to pick a name that matched my heritage.”

Along with ensuring that the name fit in terms of birth year and ethnicity, many transgender individuals searched for names that were not gender ambiguous. All the individuals I spoke with and the majority of the forum posts said that they were looking for what they considered an overtly masculinized or feminized name. One individual commented that they “wrote down every masculine name that came to mind” (catlinggun, Reddit) and were focused on finding what they considered male names. I spoke with participants regarding which names they considered and many could not remember all the names they rejected but out of their lists there were common male and female names that society sees as overtly masculine and feminine. It is highly subjective as well. Many looked to baby books or websites which automatically list names as male, female or unisex. A reason mentioned in the data for finding a name that is exclusively male or female was to avoid improper pronoun usage; drummingbooming says “that it be unambiguously and exclusively male, so that there could be no mistaking the pronouns that go with”.

Pronouns are something that go hand in hand with a name. If someone is only introduced by name it is the name that indexes the gender in the hearer’s mind. For many transgender individuals, the shift in pronouns also is an important part of their gender transition. Two of my interview participants spoke on the matter:

(16) Finn: Yeah I don’t know and I mean you know my friends they were fine with it and but for a long time they would say like a female pronoun and I’d be like no and they’d be like oh but you know the thing that would bother me the most is when they would just say it and then just not correct it cause if you say it it’s fine just correct yourself and then we all understand that you realize you’ve made a mistake and that’s fine so then when they wouldn’t correct it that’s when I’d be like yo what the fuck like no that’s not okay (Finn Interview, 2014)
It is clear that for Finn the pronoun is extremely important and it is irritating for him when people cannot get it right. Finn was more okay with people messing up his name than with people getting the pronoun wrong. Finn did however also mention that the pronoun was the hardest part to change. Many people simply accepted his name change easily with no qualms but changing the pronoun was difficult. Pronouns can be a difficult change for others to accept because as Finn suggests “it’s so engrained in people that those are the only ways in which you can refer to a person without you know using their name”. Another interviewee also touched on pronouns remarking on the importance of a name being clearly gender marked rather than ambiguous.

(17) I was looking for something distinctly female. I know several people who changed their name to Jamie or other names that can be either male or female. They had poor reactions because it was not immediately clear to people talking to them what pronoun to use or what gender they were presenting as. Especially since I knew I had a long road of maintaining both identities and switching seamlessly between them, I was important to me to be able to be distinguished by name alone. (Holly Interview, 2014)

I suggest that pronouns are indexed more tightly with gender identity than names and therefore the switch is harder for people to make, whereas names would be an easier switch to perhaps because people can consider it a nickname.

Age, social class, race and gender are all parts of the criteria that gets mentioned in the data for choosing a new identity. What is common though, among the transgender individuals in the data I have collected, is to make use of one’s middle name as a first name or to use one’s first birth name as a middle name but masculinize it. As shown in some of the examples it is important to some transgender individuals to maintain a connection to their birth name, either because it is still part of who they are or because it is a way for them to continue to respect their parents. Respect for their parents is motivated by various factors that depend on each individual. As mentioned previously, including parents in the renaming process is also important to many of the individuals who posted. In the interview with Finn, we see the same thing:

(18) Finn: Yeah kept because of their original naming of me so I yeah basically I was like you can call me Dan because they did anyways like they call me Dan Danny you can keep calling me that that’s fine that’s what they call me all the time so but now more and more I’m like so I think sometime soon I’m gonna be like yeah you should not call me that name anymore you should call me this other name instead so they like have had time to get used to it and stuff so yeah (Finn Interview, 2014)

In Finn’s case, he did not identify with his female name Danielle at all, and did not identify with the masculine version of it either. Finn still wanted to respect his parents though and his original name, therefore he masculinized it and included it in his new identity. Finn even allows his family to continue to call him Dan or Danny because they had called him that originally as a short form of Danielle, despite not identifying with it entirely. As evident in example 18 Finn is debating asking his parents to call him Finn now since they have had some time to adjust to the idea, he is not pushing it strongly though to avoid causing tension among his family.

These aspects of searching for a name build into one’s identity; it is these aspects that help a transgender individual complete the process that will help them determine which name to choose, leading them to a name that feels just right. Searching for the correct name is in fact so important to transgender individuals that the name, based on my data, often comes first in their transition. It can be said that if “we understand the names, we should understand the information they carry, namely the identity of their bearers” (Sadeghi 2009: 2). Names carry so much information of the bearer and so it is understandable that for a transgender individual the name becomes one of the primary changes they make in their transitions. Names index so much about an individual
and they hold a great deal of social and cultural value as expressed already in the data shown, because a name holds so much it is understanding that they are valuable to an individual. Having a proper name that reflects key aspects of one’s identity and reflects who they are at the essence empowers an individual. The transition between assigned gender and gender identity is not an easy one for transgender individuals, this process is made easier for them when they have a name they can feel empowered by. One individual remarks, “I took it up long before I was out of the closet. I started it about a year and a half ago to make me feel better” (Alice Marie Interview 2014) and yet another said, “its other people who give it to us, and then mostly used by other people to identify us. I felt odd trying to come up for my own name, and felt more comfortable when going to other people--because I knew who I was. I needed a name for other people to know who I was” (Senor_Potato, Reddit). A name becomes a vital aspect of their transition as it is crucial for allowing them to let others know who they are, it provides a “clear [break] in identity that transforms a person’s life” (Emmelhainz 2012: 170).

4. Conclusion

Identity “is a powerful construct. It guides life paths and decisions, [allows] people to draw strength from their affiliation with social groups and collectives, and explains many of the destructive behaviors that people carry out against members of opposing ethnic, cultural or national groups” (Schwartz, Luyckx & Vignoles 2011). In the formation of one’s identity, language plays a vital role, as examined in this paper it is shown that a great amount of effort is placed into finding a name that will express one’s identity. For a transgender individual this is an identity they feel is who they are at their core, it is the gender they align with rather than the one they were assigned at birth. These individuals put a great deal of effort, time and consideration into finding a name as they realize that their name is a social construct and pivot point for the rest of their identity. A great importance then is put on naming our identity, names become a “core part of how we know ourselves and operate in the social world” (Emmelhainz 2012:176). It is through names that we are able to project our sense of self into the world and through names that we are empowered to take action and perform our identity.

Finding a name that fits who someone is at that their essence becomes a vital aspect of a transgender individual’s transition. The practice for finding a name then is the self-discovery of learning who one is at one’s core. It is a journey to discovering one’s true identity. That identity is not only created by oneself, for oneself, but it is also created impart by those around oneself: family, friends, co-workers and passers-by on the street, through indexicality, it is [comprised] not only [of] “who you think you are” (individually or collectively), but also “who you act as being” in interpersonal and intergroup interactions – and the social recognition” (Schwartz, Luyckx & Vignoles 2011). My data shows a strong reliance on thoughts and opinions from family or friends. It becomes crucial to a transgender individual to find acceptance of their name among their social community, as it symbolizes an acceptance of themselves and of who they are.

As names are both an expression and construction of identity and identity is partly a social construct it matters what others think. This is important to take note of because understanding the importance of social feedback is important to understanding how valuable a name is to an individual. I stated that my data showed overwhelmingly that most transgender individuals did not care about what other people thought once they found their name, while this is true there were still some who cared greatly what others thought. One particular interviewee going by the name Evan reported that one of the names he rejected was Asa, and if he had not relied on the opinions of friends or family he would have chosen Asa. In fact, he still is uncertain about Evan and still often thinks about Asa. Asa is a name he felt a deeper connection to, Asa is the name that called out to him. Friends told him that Asa was too old fashion and not a good name and Evan took it to heart. He would not use Asa because of the negative feedback he received regarding it. Even Finn who
claimed so strongly that it wouldn’t matter what others thought about their name, still cared about what friends thought while he considered names. If absolute strangers or mere acquaintances did not like their name that was another story but close friend’s opinions were held in high regard. The construction of one’s identity is heavily dependent on social construction.

This journey and the process of finding that name and building that identity is done by confiding in friends and family, asking the opinions of others around them, giving the name at trial run and testing out before finally finding that one name that embodies who they are. It is a journey to finding that one name that clicks and ‘feels right’, it is who they are. It becomes what they identify with on a deeper level, the name they feel best represents them at their essence of who they are. Fundamentally for a transgender individual it is about unitariness: the true name is one that represents their essential self. The search for a name that represents their essence is a search for unitariness, to resolve the mismatch of internal and external identity into one single, unified person. When this is achieved, there is relief and satisfaction. For them a name is a tool, it is something that they can use to show others in their performance of self, who they are, and it allows others to treat them by the gender they identify with. It allows them to take a step away from that previous identity and step into an identity that they can easily embody and naturally perform. By investigating the process of re-naming oneself it is clear that names are a fundamental aspect of one’s identity as they not only answer the question, “who are you” but they set the stage for one’s performance of self.

As a fundamental aspect of identity, names provide a point in a transgender individual’s life when they can say they have changed from who they use to be into who they are. Paul Tournier writes that:

“to change one’s name is to break one’s continuity as a person, to cut oneself off from the whole of one’s past, which has defined one’s person up to that point. Proof of this is the fact that a change of name may be desired by an individual and accepted by society when the change has a […] significance. The new name asserts that a new life is beginning, like a new birth” (Tournier 1975: 19).

Transgender individuals use names as a breaking point to break away from their assigned gender and to embody the gender they identify with. When that name is accepted by society as Tournier points out it becomes an assertion of a new life. Tournier likens it to a new birth and some of my interviewees have said the same. Anna choose Renee as a middle name because it means “rebirth” and she thought it was fitting as naming herself now was a rebirth into the gender she identifies with. The significance of a name as a rebirthing process is also evident with Caitlyn Jenner and the way she uses it to announce to the world this is who she is. Her first tweet on Twitter read similar to that of a birth announcement, welcoming Caitlyn to the world: “I'm so happy after such a long struggle to be living my true self. Welcome to the world Caitlyn. Can't wait for you to get to know her/me”. The hashtag trend that followed Caitlyn’s coming out also emphasizes the importance of a name. With the name change it becomes not just a man or woman dressing as a member of the opposite sex. The names makes the identity, the name says this is who I am and gives them membership into society as that gender. From this it is clear that a name holds a great deal of social significance. My research and research before mine seek to understand this importance. It is important to understand why people want to change their names and the factors that are used in deciding a name. With the name change it becomes not just a man or woman dressing as a member of the opposite sex. The names makes the identity, the name says this is who I am and gives them membership into society as that gender. From this it is clear that a name holds a great deal of social significance. My research and research before mine seek to understand this importance. It is important to understand why people want to change their names and the factors that are used in deciding a name. It helps us understand our own culture, such as the role parent’s play, and the importance of names for other people. It shows the importance of social acceptance of name, not just in transgender individuals but in names for anyone. Names are a way of claiming our identity, not just our way of saying “this is me” but they are also society’s way of seeing us. It shows how people react to each other and how they perceive each other and how a name says something about who we are by the choices we make when choosing a name. Through this we can better understand the way our society and culture think and in gaining a better understanding of this we can help each other. Understanding the importance of a name and the journey a transgender individual takes to
discovering themselves and finding a name that fits who they are at the core, will help society as a whole in being able to understand each other and paving the way for accepting one another.

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