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# 1. Role ambiguity and role conflict among partners of trans people

## Abstract

*Experiences of family members are often overlooked in social research on gender transitions. The current article aims to address this gap by considering the experiences of partners during a gender transition, approaching this topic through role theory and the concepts of role ambiguity and role conflict. 17 partners and former partners were interviewed. First, we distinguished three different roles of partners during the transition: the co-parental role, the ally role and the romantic partner role. We found that ambiguity was most apparent for the romantic partner role. Second, we observed that the expectations which accompany these different roles often contradict each other during gender transition. This leads to role conflict. We discuss how this role conflict may influence the acceptance and adaptation process of the partner and steer certain relationship outcomes. In the discussion, we construct three types of adaptation processes of partners*

## Keywords:

**In review:** Dierckx, Myrte; Mortelmans, Dimitri, Motmans, Joz, “ Role ambiguity and role conflict among partners of trans people” submitted at Sociology

## **Introduction**

It is notable that the family context is often overlooked in research on the trans population, especially of trans adults. In particular, the perspective of family members remains a rather understudied topic. Nevertheless, being a partner of someone who discloses they are trans can be challenging. Trans people are a gender minority who often encounter stigmatization in heteronormative societies in which sexual dimorphism (two biological sexes) and binary gender roles remain the standard: the assumption is that one is a man or a woman and heterosexual (Carrera-Fernández, Lameiras-Fernández, & Rodríguez-Castro, 2014; Walch, Ngamake, Francisco, Stitt, & Shingler, 2012). This stigmatization and the heteronormative expectations may also pose a challenge for loved ones of trans people (Israel, 2005). Social support has proved to be an important positive influence on the well-being of the still highly stigmatized group of trans people (Erich, Tittsworth, Dykes, & Cabuses, 2008). Therefore, studies that investigate the family context – in this article, the partners involved – are highly relevant to gaining insight into how to sustain this crucial social support. The current article aims to address the knowledge gap concerning partners of trans individuals by considering their experiences during the gender transition using role theory and its application within the tradition of Symbolic Interactionism. In this way, we aim to deepen knowledge on trans partnerships within a broader family sociology context. First, we distinguish the different roles that partners play during the transition, and examine how these different roles may come under pressure through the gender transition process of their partner. Second, we analyze how these different social roles may lead to internal role conflict. Finally, based on these roles and their interplay, we construct three different ideal types of adaptation processes experienced by partners.

In this study we interviewed partners who were already in a long-term relationship (more than two years) at the time the trans partner started a social and/or physical transition. We consider a gender transition to be a change in social gender role, with or without medical

intervention. The study took place in Flanders, the northern region of Belgium, during 2015 and 2016. This Flemish context is characterized by the growing visibility of the trans population in public discourse and daily life in recent years. However, general attitudes toward the trans population still include negative connotations, stigma and transnegative prejudices (Dierckx, Motmans, & Meier, forthcoming).

### **Trans relationships**

Recent studies have looked into the relationship experiences of trans people themselves (Meier, Sharp, Michonski, Babcock, & Fitzgerald, 2013; Platt & Bolland, 2016; Riggs, von Doussa, & Power, 2015) and, in particular, their sexual and intimate relationships (Doorduyn & van Berlo, 2014; Hines, 2006; Iantaffi & Bockting, 2011; Kins, Hoebeke, Heylens, Rubens, & De Cuypere, 2008), with far less focus on the experiences of their loved ones. However, in recent years, several studies have described more general psychological experiences of trans people and their partners (Alegria, 2010; Lenning & Buist, 2012; Theron & Collier, 2013). This recent shift of focus corresponds with a possibility that has been increasingly acknowledged in recent years: that many trans people can maintain their relationship. Prior to this shift, the dominant belief was that the disclosure of trans identity by one partner would inevitably lead to the end of the relationship. This might explain the relatively few studies on partners in the past.

Coming out as trans when already married or in a serious relationship can be a shock to the partner and is repeatedly described as resulting in relationship dissolution (Israel, 2005; White & Ettner, 2004), although this is not necessarily the case (Bischof, Warnaar, Barajas, & Dhaliwal, 2011; Meier et al., 2013). In a European survey of self-identified trans people (N = 6579), 7% of the sample were divorced. In the same sample, a mean marital and registered partnership rate of 15% was observed (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2014). A similar US study (N = 1229) reported a divorce rate of 12.3% and a marital and registered

partnership rate of 19.5% (Rosser, Oakes, Bockting, & Miner, 2007). Within the large and diverse trans population, differences across groups can be found, with divorce rates tending to be higher among trans women than among trans men (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2014). It has also been found that trans women are more likely to experience difficulty maintaining partner relationships than trans men (Riggs et al., 2015). This discrepancy might be explained to some extent by the difference in timing of the transition between these two groups (Scheim & Bauer, 2015): trans women tend to start their transition later in their lives, when they have already been involved in a long-term relationship, while trans men tend to transition earlier in their lives. We might also assume that the latter often engage in a long-term relationship only after their gender transition. The former group possibly experience several challenges when they come out and start to transition in the context of a long-term, presumably cisgender, relationship.

Partners in long-term relationships are likely to experience a range of emotions such as stress, grief, anger, betrayal, loneliness and fear after their partners come out as trans (Theron & Collier, 2013; Zamboni, 2006) and are sometimes found to struggle with their own sexual orientation and gender identity (Bischof et al., 2011; Brown, 2009; Harvey, 2008; Theron & Collier, 2013; Whitley, 2013). Several mediating factors are distinguished in the acceptance and adjustment process of the partner. First, the way in which the trans partner comes out can affect how their partner reacts. Interviews with partners have shown that when the disclosure involved a gradual process, the cis partner often expressed more understanding. If the disclosure occurred in an abrupt and disturbing way, it led to more distress and emotional turmoil (Bischof et al., 2011; Harvey, 2008), with some partners feeling betrayed and lied to (Samons, 2009). However, a gradual disclosure may also be challenging for partners. In the assessment of couples, where the cisgender partner knew about their partner's transgender feelings for a longer time and had tolerated their cross-gender behavior in the private sphere, the decision to

transition could feel as if the rules of the relationship had changed (Samons, 2009). A second factor is the degree to which the partner experiences the trans partner as self-centered. Various studies suggest that partners may need to feel that they are involved in the gender transition process as well as the disclosure process with respect to their children and other people outside the family (Bischof et al., 2011; Harvey, 2008; Theron & Collier, 2013). If the couple have children, partners can feel stressed about the possible effects of the gender transition on them (Haines, Ajayi, & Boyd, 2014). Partners may need time and space to adapt and renegotiate their own identity in what has become a trans relationship (Brown, 2009). Third, certain traits of the relationship – unrelated to the trans issue – have been found to have an impact on the reaction of the partner to the disclosure by the trans partner, for example, the presence of other issues causing marital conflict. In addition, if rigid gender roles were the norm in the relationship, a gender transition may be more problematic, insofar as it challenges these traditional gender expectations (Israel, 2005; Samons, 2009). Furthermore, former gay or lesbian couples might experience a sense of loss of connection with the Lesbian Gay and Bisexual (LGB) community (Harvey, 2008; Joslin-Roher & Wheeler, 2009).

This process of acceptance occurring within the wider transition process may take time and consist of different stages. Lev (2004) and Emerson (1996) both described different stages in the reactions and adjustment of families where one family member has come out as transgender (Emerson, 1996; Lev, 2004). In addition to several different emotional and sometimes negative experiences of cis partners, some studies also mention positive aspects of having a trans partner, such as developing more effective communication strategies and an increase in the well-being of the trans partner, which consequently increases the level of satisfaction within the relationship (Harvey, 2008).

## **Theoretical framework**

In this paper, we apply role theory within the tradition of Symbolic Interactionism (SI). Role theory explains individual and social behavior in terms of the different social roles a person takes. Social roles entail role expectations, and people have been found to behave according to the expectations associated with their social identities (Biddle, 1986, 2013). These expectations are shaped through social norms, beliefs and preferences. In this article, we consider roles on the micro level, in line with the tradition of SI. This theoretical perspective considers that society is created and maintained through face-to-face, repeated, meaningful interactions between individuals (Carter & Fuller, 2016), and emphasizes the construction and evolution of social roles through social interaction (Biddle, 1986). The self is considered to be constructed from diverse “parts” and emerges out of social relationships (Stryker, 1968). Symbolic interactionism has been acknowledged to be useful for understanding the social construction of gender and sexuality in daily interactions (Carter & Fuller, 2016). West and Zimmerman called the construction of gender in this manner as “doing gender” (West & Zimmerman, 1987).

In contrast to one of the founding fathers of SI, George Herbert Mead, who emphasized the fluid nature of meanings and the self in interaction, Sheldon Stryker emphasized the idea that meanings and interactions lead to relatively stable patterns that create and maintain social structures (Carter & Fuller, 2016). Stryker defined roles as “expectations which are attached to [social] positions,” or “symbolic categories [that] serve to cue behavior” (Stryker, 1980: 57 in Carter & Fuller, 2016). Stryker’s framework is called “structural symbolic interactionism.” While Stryker emphasizes the structural aspect, the theory also assumes role improvisation, hence, process and flexibility. Stryker generalizes, stating that “in interactions when role incumbents’ selves and identities and their goals and interests are satisfied they will conform to

the role expectations.” In contrast, disruptive social circumstances will encourage role improvisation (Platt, 2001).

Two key concepts of role theory are applied in this article: “role ambiguity” and “role conflict.” Role ambiguity is a condition in which the expectations regarding a certain role are incomplete or insufficient to guide behavior (Biddle, 1986). This condition is based on a lack of information regarding a social role and, therefore, means the outcomes of an individual’s behavior are relatively unpredictable (Pearce, 1981). Another and more frequently discussed concept within role theory is role conflict. Given that people’s identities are formed by different social roles or, in terms of symbolic interactionism, the self must be conceptualized as constructed from diverse “parts” (Stryker, 1968), role conflict occurs when demands associated with one role, or part, interfere directly with one’s ability to satisfy the demands of another role, or part (Hecht, 2001). When this occurs, the two or more incompatible expectations may cause stress (Biddle, 1986). Stryker adds the concept of “identity salience,” which he defines as the probability of a given identity being invoked in a certain situation. This probability can differ and creates a hierarchy of saliences across different contexts. When different identities are concurrent, the commitment to this hierarchy of salience becomes important (Stryker, 1968).

There is an overwhelming amount of literature on role conflict in the context of combining workplaces, organizational structures and the work-family balance of women (Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985; Kopelman, Greenhaus, & Connolly, 1983; Rothbard, Phillips, & Dumas, 2005). However, in other domains, role theory and the concept of role conflict have not been that widely adapted. Some scholars have adapted role theory to explore the intersection of transgender, relationships and sexuality. For example, Wester suggested using gender role conflict when counselling trans women, while several studies have focused on the relationship between gender role conflict and other psychological traits (Blashill & Hughes, 2009; Choi,



Herdman, Fuqua, & Newman, 2011). In addition, Whitley studied how significant others, family and friends, were doing and redoing gender during a gender transition (Whitley, 2013).

### **Study rationale**

As the gender transition of a loved one is a unique and non-normative situation, it is possible that it puts social roles under pressure and causes uncertainty, and may lead to identity salience. In this article, we consider the different social roles of partners during a gender transition and their possible ambiguity, as well as inter-role conflict within the couple during the gender transition of one of the partners. How are these social roles influenced by the gender transition of a partner? To what extent do these roles imply similar role expectations? How does the interplay and possible conflict between these roles influence the adaptation process of partners? Is there identity salience or role improvisation? Can we gain an insight into how the taking up of certain roles shapes certain relationship outcomes?

## **Methods**

### **Methodological framework**

We used the open interview method, which is based on Grounded Theory and related to SI (Jeon, 2004; Oswald, 2002). This allowed the partners' personal and sometimes very intimate experiences, both during and after the gender transition, to become the focus of the research. This methodological approach fitted well with the analysis of social roles within the family context.

The findings presented in this article were partly obtained in the context of the research project "Families in Transition," which was commissioned by the Flemish government to gain insight into the experiences of families with a trans parent. A research protocol was developed for this study, which included methodological issues such as informed consent and the

protection of research participants. The research protocol was approved by the Ethics Committee for Social Sciences and Humanities at the University of Antwerp.

### **Data collection & analysis**

An open call for participation was distributed in the spring of 2015 among various Flemish Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender (LGBT) family and civil society organizations, as well as the network of clinical practitioners in transgender health care and through social media. This call was relaunched on social media in spring 2016. Open, in-depth interviews were conducted using a topic list drawn up on the basis of a literature review. The topic list was structured by, but not limited to, the following subthemes: the coming out of the partner, the social and physical transition of the partner, emotions experienced during the process, the effect on the romantic and intimate relationship, relationships with other family members, the reactions and influence of the outside world, and reflections on the long-term outcomes of the gender transition for the couple's relationship and family life in general.

First, we decided to only include partners who were already in a long-term relationship (more than two years) at the time the trans partner started a social and/or physical transition. This meant that almost none of the partners were aware of the trans identity of their loved one at the beginning of their relationship: they assumed they were engaged in a cis relationship. Second, we defined a gender transition to be a change in social gender role, with or without medical intervention. Our sample consists of partners and former partners of a broader group of trans individuals and not only transsexuals.

Before the start of the interview, each of the participants received a written explanation of the purpose of the research, which was explained once again by the interviewer before the start of the interview. An informed consent form was signed. The participants were given the opportunity to reread the transcript of their own interview and make adjustments if required. Three participants asked that minor adjustments be made. The interviews lasted between 61

minutes and 2.5 hours. All interviews, with the exception of two, took place at the residence of the participants. One participant was interviewed at the university, one at her workplace. Most respondents preferred to be interviewed individually. However, four couples requested that the interview take place in the presence of their trans partner. All interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed, and all transcripts were analyzed using the software program Nvivo (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). As the interviews touched upon a wide range of topics and experiences, they were first open coded using a bottom-up approach based on Grounded Theory method: codes were formed through a reading and analysis process (Starks & Trinidad, 2007). In a second phase, the codes were structured, with specific attention being paid to different roles and possible role ambiguity and conflict.

## Results

### Sample

*Table 1: Overview sample*

<b>Gender identity respondents</b>	Female: 16 Male:1
<b>Gender identity trans partner</b>	Female (trans woman): 15 Male (trans man): 2
<b>Status of the relationship</b>	Separated: 6 Living together: 11
<b>Transition of the relationship before and after gender transition of partner</b>	Heterosexual to same sex: 16 Same sex to heterosexual: 1
<b>Presence of children</b>	Yes: 15 No: 2

In total, 17 partners took part, all living in Flanders, Belgium. One respondent identified as male, all the others as female. Of the trans partners, two identified as male, all the others as female. Thus, 16 couples could be identified as heterosexual before the transition and as lesbian/homosexual at the time of the interview, while one couple could be identified as lesbian

before the transition and heterosexual at the time of the interview. Two couples had no children together, while all 15 other couples did have children together. In three of these families, there were also step-children from former relationships. 11 respondents were still living as a couple with their trans partner, while six couples had ended their relationship. All of the latter mentioned the gender transition as the main reason for the relationship dissolution. For confidentiality reasons, the names used in the results section are all pseudonyms.

### **Roles during the transition**

The open codes were structured in the second phase of the analytic process. We asked which social roles defined the partners' behaviors, expectations and insecurities during the transition of their partner. We distinguished three different social roles which, according to all respondents, were put under pressure by the transition: the co-parental role, the ally role and the romantic partner role. We will discuss these three roles and the possible ambiguities that the gender transition created in relation to them.

#### ***The co-parental role***

As mentioned above, 15 respondents had children with their trans partner. For all these respondents, the decision to start a family had been a rather conscious one. Often the respondents had been in the relationship and living together for several years before they made the intentional step to parenthood. Regardless of how they felt about the gender transition of their partner, all respondents with children acknowledged the co-parental role of their trans partner. Hence, for all respondents, the co-parental role was highly relevant during the transition of their partner. Feelings of responsibility, insecurity and protection toward their children were very strong, and they reported that they often had the feeling they needed to guide their children through the gender transition of the other parent. To achieve this, they looked up information to better inform their children on the trans topic, they informed schools and the parents of peers about the gender transition, and they took their children to professional counsellors who were

familiar with the topic. One concern that arose repeatedly in this regard was the extent to which the gender transition of a parent would harm the well-being of the children. The respondents were especially concerned about the reaction within the social environment of the children, and worried that the trans parent would be rejected by this social environment and cause secondary stigma for the children.

I was always very worried that the children would be rejected because of [partner's name]. That would have been terrible ... Their lives are still to take off. What will their future partners think about it? If they have children, then they will have two grandmothers? It has many consequences for them and sometimes I feel guilty about it. (Veerle, partner of a trans woman, parent of two daughters aged 19 and 15)

Older children, or teenagers, sometimes reacted rather negatively to the transition of their parent. The respondents would then feel responsible for negotiating between the child and the trans parent in these conflicts. As well as increasing the understanding that their children had of the trans identity of the other parent, they also mediated when children disagreed with the transition or certain aspects of it. For example, with the approval of her trans partner, Kristien told her three children, all three young adults still living at home, that their father went to another city on the weekend to live as her preferred gender. Kristien thought this openness toward their children was important but the children reacted very negatively and showed little understanding toward either parent. Kristien asked them to give "it a chance.". The protective reflex of the respondents was not only present regarding their children, but also regarding their own parental role. For almost all the female respondents, the transition of their partner led to a protective reflex about their own maternal role.

Yes, I'm the mama. That was the first issue. I wanted it to stay just like that. My perception was: I have given birth to these children, I'm the mama. Full stop. (Sofie, former partner of a trans woman, parent of two sons aged 9 and 7)

### *The ally role*

A second role we distinguished among respondents was that of supportive ally. This role was based on friendship and commitment and was rooted in the fact that the trans partner had been someone important in the life of the respondent for a long time: they were someone who the respondent cared about and had known for years. The ally role was often related to experiences occurring prior to the partner coming out: respondents had often already taken up the ally role before their partner's disclosure of their trans identity. They had experienced how their partner was not very happy or at ease with him or herself. Depression, suicidal thoughts, burn-out and anxiety attacks had occurred many times prior to their coming out. On many occasions, respondents had already invested a lot of effort in supporting their partner in relation to these psychological issues. In this situation, the disclosure of their trans identity was sometimes experienced by the respondents as a hopeful, new perspective. Sometimes these psychological problems were less apparent, but respondents felt, for example, that their trans partner was not really a 'real' man because of 'feminine' traits, such as high sensitivity, high emotional intelligence and lack of sexual drive. Thus, for many respondents the coming out of their partner was like finding the missing piece of a puzzle. However, this does not mean their partner coming out was not a surprise. For many partners, it was still a very shocking experience.

Suddenly, from one day to another, I was aware that she was really transgender. At first I was very worried ... I had a hard time seeing her in those very feminine clothes. I could not stand that, but on the other hand, I realized ... She was someone I'd known for such a long time, and you could see something was not right. There was something wrong and maybe that person needed help. (Anne, partner of a trans woman, parent of a daughter and a son aged 19 and 10)

Several respondents supported the decision to transition because they considered that this could be part of the solution to a longstanding problem concerning the well-being of someone they had deeply cared about for a long time. However, respondents often did not know

what kind of support was needed or wanted by their partner. Several partners tried to gain information through health professionals, the internet and trans organizations in order to improve their understanding of the trans identity of their partner. The respondents were concerned about the medical, psychological and financial risks that might arise when the trans partner started to use hormones and undergo surgery. As a result, they sometimes tried to slow down the transition process. They forced the trans partner to be reflective about decisions in their own transition process and about the timing of certain steps in the that process. Questions were raised such as: “Do you realize the consequences of the decision to transition?,” “Do you need sex reassignment surgery considering the medical risks (at your age)?,” “When and how will you inform your colleagues?” Another aspect of the ally role was being supportive during the transition in relation to the outside world – to protect the trans partner against stigmatization and insults.

I have to admit that at a certain moment I became her biggest supporter. If we went out and I saw people staring, then I took her hand explicitly. If they had made comments, they would have got into trouble with me. Ouch, it would not have been their best day (laughs). (Lut, partner of a trans woman, parent of a son and a daughter aged 23 and 21)

Compared to the co-parental role, the ally role was less naturally adopted. Being a supportive ally was made possible through conscious considerations and emotional commitment.

### ***The romantic partner***

The third role is that of the romantic partner, a role formed in the context of romantic love and an intimate and sexual relationship between partners. Many of the respondents had already been in a relationship with their trans partner for several years before the transition, and sometimes decades. Most described the relationship as satisfying, although they felt that their

partner had been restless, psychologically distressed and sometimes had a low sex drive. The generally satisfying and stable relationship was disturbed by the revelation of their partner's trans identity. Consequently, their partner's coming out often led to decreased intimacy between couples. Several respondents felt uneasy about approaching their trans partner's body, now knowing that it did not accord with the gender identity of their partner. Sometimes, the disclosure itself caused this unease, while in other cases the unease was a result of physical changes to the partner's body, for example, due to hormone treatment. In addition, the decision to transition sometimes resulted in uncertainties about the respondent's own sexual identity. Some partners in former heterosexual relationships felt reluctant to engage in a now same-sex relationship. They felt that they could not 'transition' their sexual preference, and that the conditions of the initial relationship were fundamentally changed. This reluctance was rooted in both personal psychological discomfort and a more general fear of stigma.

It's weird that when we go out we are a lesbian couple. But that's not how I feel, because I'm not really attracted to women. I still feel attracted to men. Although, it's not a problem to me to go out with Lieve. In the beginning it was a problem and then I thought: "What will the people think? Will they see it ...?" That meant that ... in the beginning there was some distance between us. (Veerle, partner of a trans woman, parent of two daughters aged 19 and 15)

The fact that your partner starts to live in a different gender role not only affects the sexual relationship but also the gendered roles within the couple. Many female respondents felt "over-ruled in their female identity," and they questioned this identity, as they observed the sometimes stereotypical gender behavior of their trans partner. The role of romantic partner was overall characterized by grief, sadness and disappointment: the person you love turns out to be fundamentally different to the person you thought they were. Many respondents compared the feeling with grief or heartbreak, although the person was still there.



Yeah, [partner's male name] has left me. I can remember that at a certain moment I realized that I missed him while she was sitting next to me ... That was really strange. That you say to someone sitting beside you: "Actually, I miss you." (Evelien, former partner of trans woman)

The few respondents who did not experienced their romantic partner role as problematic during the transition process all had rather fluid sexual preferences. Some of them realized this fluidity only when their partner started the transition.

On the other hand, I was thinking: Yes, I used to say that I am heterosexual, but on the other hand, he is getting breasts and it doesn't bother me. So, how heterosexual am I? (Ester, partner of a trans woman, mother of two sons aged 2 and 0.5 and step-mother of a son aged 9)

**Role ambiguity.** A gender transition is a non-normative situation where there is not a fixed social script on how to behave as romantic partner, ally or co-parent. Consequently, respondents experienced some uncertainty in relation to all three roles. However, in our analysis it became clear that this ambiguity was most apparent for the romantic partner role and to lesser degree for the ally and co-parental roles.

### **The dynamic between the three different roles**

The three roles were not mutual exclusive and could be present at the same time. This could lead in some instances to clear role conflict. The core of this conflicting dynamic was often the ally role. Whether or not there were children, or the respondents were still living with their trans partner, deciding to be an ally or not during the transition was always an issue. This consideration was influenced by the presence of children and their reactions, the nature of the relationship before the transition and the respondent's own sexual identity.

### ***The ally role versus the co-parental role: between responsibility and doubt.***

Being a good parent and being a supportive ally during the transition was not always found to be compatible. Within the co-parental role, guiding and assuming responsibility for the children often conflicted with the questions the respondents felt as an ally. Most of the time, the respondents had been informed about the partner's trans identity before the children were

told. Keeping such a big secret from your children caused the respondents stress. Moreover, hiding the trans identity of their partner sometimes called for ingenuity. At the same time, respondents were often concerned about informing the children. The questions that were raised included: “How and when do I communicate about the transition with my child?,” “How will my child react?” At the same time, respondents realized that they could not problematize the trans identity of the co-parent too much, because that could possibly affect the children in a negative way. It was thought that an honest and open atmosphere in which children and parents could talk openly about their insecurities and questions might lessen this inter-role tension.

Regardless of the fact that we are now separated and I was hurt, I have always encouraged the relationship between my daughters and their father. I have never doubted the parental role of my ex. (Ilse, 43 years old, former partner of a trans women, parent of two daughters aged 14 and 12)

When the children were outspokenly negative about the transition of their trans parent, the ally role of the cis partner faced an even greater level of tension. Realizing that every person copes with a transition in a different way was often helpful in handling this tension:

If we went out, she [her daughter] did not want to come with us. Well, we have never forced that either. But last April we had been married for 24 years, and we went out for brunch the four of us. It was the first time she had come with us. I thought: “Wow, this is a big step.” Our son had already got that far last year. (Lut, partner of a trans woman, parent of a son and a daughter aged 23 and 21)

When children were very negative about the transition of their parent, the respondents had the feeling that they had to protect their trans partner from vindictive arguments and the possibility of the children rejecting the trans partner. This was especially the case when children were older and openly discussed the gender transition with their parents. Two respondents with adolescent children described it as “piggy in the middle”. It was also possible that children

could react positively and be supportive of the transition, which could strengthen the partner in his or her role as ally:

My oldest daughter reacted like: “Okay, from now it is [male name of trans partner]. I was jealous. That it was so self-evident for her. And that makes us stronger as a couple. Together you are strong. (Margot, partner of a trans man, parent of two daughters and a son, aged 16, 14 and 3)

***Romantic partner role versus ally role: negotiation and redefinition in a context of grief.***

Respondents experienced the ally role as difficult when the grieving process was still overwhelming. Due to the distress, it was difficult to support the trans partner in the way they wanted to. When they thought that the trans partner was taking their grieving process into account, the ally role was easier to take on. This process entailed an exchange of recognition: partners wanted to be recognized for their loss and grief, and in return they found it easier to support their trans partner during the transition process. However, the process of finding a new balance within the couple was difficult to establish in the context of distress:

We have had a lot of fights, but not really about the trans story... We were the average squabbling couple, but when I had a difficult time I dared to say: “Apparently, it is not enough that you burden me with being trans, but now you forget to get the pasta sauce.” That was not fair of me. She accepted a lot of unkind stuff from me out of guilt ... I could be mean and I am not proud of that. That was also the moment I realized: “If that’s the kind of person I will become in this relationship, then it stops here.” At that moment [of breaking up the relationship] a lot of pressure fell away. (Evelien, former partner of trans woman)

Sometimes this reciprocity of recognition could become an actual give and take negotiation in the context of which symbolic thresholds often played an important role. Examples of such symbolic thresholds were permanent hair removal, starting hormone treatment and surgery. In other words, partners made agreements such as: “I’ll be there for you during the transition as long you don’t have any surgery.” This process of give and take was often nothing more than the expression of a realignment of the power relationship between the

couple. When this negotiation process failed, the result was often feelings of resentment, severe irritation or a relationship dissolution. Sometimes the ally role was given up at the same time:

Why should I be angry? Because he chooses to be a woman? The only thing I'm angry about is that he chose to do the process alone. Otherwise, I think we would still be together. But he chose to do it on his own terms ... Sorry, it doesn't work like that for me. Too much has happened. Every time I was pushed away ... (Lieve, former partner of trans woman, parent of two sons and a daughter, aged 24, 23 and 20)

At the beginning of the gender transition process, some partners were very supportive allies and romantic partners, and only realized after some time, sometimes several years, that their commitment contradicted their desires regarding their romantic partner role. Sophie told of how she regretted her promise to support her partner and stay together as a couple ten years earlier. She still wanted to be there for her partner, but missed having a man in her life and doubted whether she could keep her promise to remain a couple. This internal struggle made her feel very guilty toward her trans partner.

### ***Romantic partner versus co-parental role: parental expectations and individual desires***

Respondents often felt that the considerations related to their role as romantic partner were in contradiction with the well-being of the children. The questions which were often raised included: “Do I stay in this relationship or not?,” “What do I do for the sake of the children and what for the sake of myself?,” “Is a divorce or staying together as a trans family in the best interest of the children?” Respondents felt that a good decision for them was not necessarily good for the children. The consequences of growing up in an atypical trans family or in a divorced family were both considered.

That was a real struggle for me: “What should I do? Do I stay? ...” This is a decision that I should take for myself. Not for the children but for myself. The children will grow up and move out of the house, but I have to grow old with my partner. (Veerle, partner of a trans woman, parent of two daughters aged 19 and 15)

It's a response I often get, admiration because I stayed with my partner. It's just like that. I don't see any merit in that. It's the way we took together, for a big part determined by the care for our children. (Mark, partner of trans man, parent of two sons)

The respondents also found that children were often more concerned about the possibility of a divorce than the transition. This suggests that the possible conflict between the romantic partner role and the co-parental role was also acknowledged by the children themselves. Ilse was one of the few respondents who openly disconnected the roles of co-parent and romantic partner and stated, also with respect to her children:

My relationship, that I can end. I cannot become a lesbian, but that relationship between parent and child ... That is so important and I never tried to interfere with that. I said to my children: "Look, your father made that choice, but that does not mean he loves you less and also the other way around. It doesn't change the love you have for each other. But for me it does, because he was my husband." (Ilse, 43 years old, former partner of a trans women, parent of two daughters aged 14 and 12)

**Toward a conflict model of the partner in transition role.** While the three roles were clearly defined throughout our analyses, in their daily lives, respondents often experienced multiple role conflicts during the transition. Overall, the co-parental role was the most stable. The love for their children and the accompanying responsibility meant that their co-parental role was never really questioned by the respondents, nor was the parental role of the trans partner. However, in specific situations and moments, the co-parental role was temporarily subordinated to the others. The experience and interpretation of the ally role was less consistent among the respondents. This role could evolve dramatically over time among the different respondents. At the beginning, some respondents were rather skeptical but evolved toward truly confident supporters. Others changed from positive and supporting partners to disappointed and frustrated former allies. In all cases, the romantic partner role was experienced as the most problematic by our respondents. Whether or not they supported the gender transition of their partner, their romantic and intimate relationship was seriously questioned. Figure 1 is a visual

presentation of the three roles and the dynamic between them. The cascading elevation represents the difficulty in taking up a particular role during the transition.

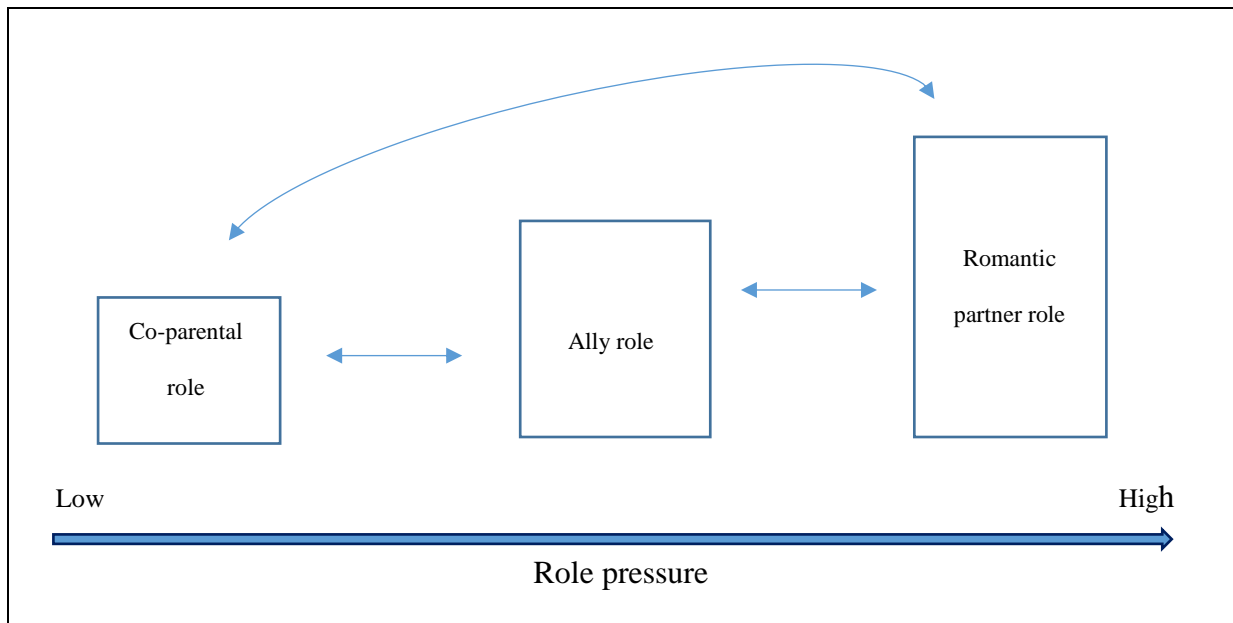


Figure 1: Role Pressure and interplay between roles

## Discussion

The three roles we identified are in line with previous research on trans relationships that have shown the challenges partners experience regarding sexual identity and relationship stability (Alegria, 2010), as well as in being a supportive partner and a parent at the same time (Haines et al., 2014). However, the previous research on this issue has been rather descriptive, therefore, the research presented here attempted to deepen the analysis of the experience of partners of people undergoing transition by analyzing the different dynamics between the three roles observed. The interplay between these three roles was at times a clear example of role conflict. Based on the current findings, we can construct three different ideal-typical adaptation processes of partners of people who disclose their trans feelings. These three ideal-typical processes are distinguished based on which of the three roles becomes more or less salient within this role conflict, with different relationship outcomes depending on which roles are more salient. The table below schematically presents the different adaptation processes.

Table 2: Adaptation processes of partners

Type of adaptation process of partners	Pre-transition: Coming out & awareness process	During the transition process	Post-transition
<b>Intimate joint</b>	No roles questioned	Role ambiguity. Role conflicts between three roles occur.	All roles present
<b>Rational separation</b>	Romantic partner role questioned	Role ambiguity. Romantic partner role and ally role questioned, role conflicts between three roles occur.	Co-parental and ally role are present. Romantic partner role can be partly present.
<b>Emotional dissolution</b>	Romantic partner and ally role questioned	Role ambiguity. All roles questioned, role conflicts between three roles occur.	Only co-parental role is present

### **Intimate joint**

In this adaptation process, the partner initially responds with understanding and relief. The partner acknowledges the transgender feelings and realizes that they may be the reason for longstanding psychological distress. However, during the transition process, the partner often feels overwhelmed by all the changes and uncertainty, and also feels that their boundaries are not always respected. Consequently, the partner tends to take a self-protective stance at times. The partner is not sure of how to cope with the transition in relation to the children and searches for information in this regard. Although the partner does not experience the transition as problematic in itself, the transition and its challenges puts the couple and the broader nuclear family under pressure. The partner reflects on their own sexual identity and concludes that it is not as fixed as had been previously thought. Post-transition, the couple reinvent themselves in both a romantic and practical sense. They are now a cooperating and co-parenting team, in relation to both their children and the outside world. Intimacy is renegotiated between the partners, but remains present.

### **Rational separation**

In this adaptation process, the partner reacts with shock and disbelief at their partner's coming out. Nonetheless, they are willing to discuss the consequences of the transgender feelings and a possible transition. During the transition, the partner communicates honestly

about their emotions resulting from the transition. At times, the partner finds the trans partner to be egocentric. The partner also wants to be involved in the transition process. Despite this positive attitude, the partner feels insecure and uncertain of where to seek help. They try to be a strong and protective figure for the couple's children and to maintain the family bonds. Despite the open and active communication between partners, they feel increasingly alienated from one another. The level of intimacy between the partners decreases during the transition process and the once stable and satisfying relationship evolves into that of two people living alongside one another. However, both partners share respect and concern for each other. If the situation leads to the dissolution of the relationship, this is decided by mutual consent. After the separation, the partners remain in close contact, based on friendship and the joint care for their children. Sometimes the partners decide to stay living together, although their intimacy is limited. Remaining together might then be perceived as a relationship of convenience.

### **Emotional dissolution**

In this adaptation process, the partner is shocked and hurt at the coming out. They are skeptical about their partner's trans identity and a possible gender transition. They feel disappointed and betrayed and respond with hostility to every new step in the transition process. The trans partner is experienced as self-absorbed. Moreover, the partner feels as if the trans partner has become a different person. They feel betrayed and look back with grief at the relationship before the transition. If there are children, the partner fears that the transition will be traumatic for them. All of the problems that occur within the family (emotional, practical and financial) are perceived to be caused by the transition. The level of intimacy between the partners decreases rapidly and there are no other forms of affection between the partners. The decision to end the relationship is generally taken unilaterally by the cis partner, who refuses to accept the gender transition. After the separation, the former partners only maintain contact with regard to practical issues and co-parenthood if there are children.



In our sample, there were no respondents for whom the co-parental role was under pressure for a long time. In other words, there was no fourth scenario in which none of the three roles were apparent. Therefore, any discussion of such a fourth type would be speculative and not based on empirical observations in this study. Nevertheless, it should be mentioned that cases have been reported in the literature where cis partners have denied parental rights to the trans former partner, sometimes supported by judicial decisions (Chang, 2002; Cooper, 2013; Downing, 2013).

Through a Grounded Theory approach, three different ideal-typical adaptation processes of partners have been established. The findings presented here lead to new insights concerning the adjustment processes of partners of trans people, as well as concerning general relationship forming, doing gender and loss related to existing sociological concepts and theory.

The process-oriented aspect of the roles discussed relies on the theoretical perspective of SI. Previous research has shown that the response and adjustment of families when a loved one comes out as transgender is not a static situation but a process (Emerson, 1996; Lev, 2004). Hines also found that a relationship between partners can evolve from a romantic, intimate relationship toward a relationship based on care and emotional support (Hines, 2006). Whitley described how significant others, family members, or friends, can also evolve to take on an ally role (Whitley, 2013). Our research adds to these earlier findings based on an analytical approach inspired by role theory and the associated concept of identity salience.

The relationship outcomes associated with the three types of adaptation processes discussed above can be interpreted as different sorts of relationships. As early as 1973, the sociologist John Lee distinguished six different types of love: Eros, Ludus, Storge, Pragma, Manic and Agape. Our findings make clear that the heteronormative ideal of romantic long-term love is challenged by a gender transition. The three types of adaptation processes discussed in this article also show us that relationships and the expectations the respondents had about

relationships could differ significantly and evolve over time. Several partners established a new kind of relationship with their trans partner, sometimes beyond their own previous relationship expectations.

The three roles discussed in this paper are not gender neutral. They are for a significant part gender related. As described in “Doing gender is unavoidable” (West & Zimmerman, 1987), we must be aware of how this process of doing gender intersects with taking up the three roles discussed here, as well as identity salience. With the exception of one, all of our respondents were female. It is important to acknowledge that gender norms and beliefs differ between women and men, especially regarding parenting and sexuality. Thus, the findings here are applicable in particular to female partners of trans woman. How these roles and adaptation processes differ significantly among the population of partners of trans men and male partners could be the subject of further research.

The negotiations and compromises between the respondents and their trans partners in the three different adaptation processes might also be interpreted from an emotional economy perspective and Hochschild’s marital economy of gratitude. Hochschild stated that men and women have different perceptions of their actions within a marriage (Hochschild, 1989). Some actions are seen to be gifts and some to be burdens imposed by spouses (Pyke & Coltrane, 1996). These actions and how they are perceived can be influenced by gender expectations (Thagaard, 1997). Some respondents had invested a lot of emotional effort in maintaining the relationship, even before the disclosure by the trans partner (ally role). The gender transition and the challenges that arise may be perceived by the partner at some point as not having given them anything in return. The give and take might be experienced as no longer balanced. In such cases, some respondents lose their sense of gratitude for their partners affirmative feelings toward them and decided to end the relationship. Other respondents experienced feelings of guilt when they no longer found their partner to be attractive (romantic partner role under

pressure), but still felt gratitude toward their partner, as “he/she had done nothing wrong” or “was very good to them” (ally role in action). Again, we assume that the adaptation process of the partner and the interplay of the three roles are formed while “doing gender,” and therefore are not gender neutral. We presume that a gender transition shakes established “gender strategies” between partners to the core.

Finally, we stated that the coming out and transition of a partner may cause role ambiguity. We consider that this ambiguity within a romantic and intimate relationship has similarities with Boss’s (2009) concept of “ambiguous loss,” which can be divided into two types: where physical absence but psychosocial presence occur (e.g., Boss’s studies on Missing-in-Action Families) and where psychological absence with physical presence occur together (e.g. Alzheimer families) (Carroll, Olson, & Buckmiller, 2007). We suggest that a gender transition in the context of a relationship may be another type of ambiguous loss, with both physical presence and psychosocial presence, and thus no “clear cut loss.”

### **Conclusion**

This study aimed to go beyond earlier findings concerning the partners of trans individuals, which were often rather descriptive. First, we distinguished three different roles that such partners may take during the transition within the couple and/or family. We pointed out how all three roles may come under pressure during the transition and lead to uncertainty and role ambiguity. Second, we observed that the expectations that accompany these different roles often contradict each other, especially during a transition. These contradictions lead to role conflict. Third, we discussed how such role conflicts and the interplay between the different roles may influence the acceptance and adaptation process of the partner. Ultimately, this dynamic interchange between roles can also determine the relationship outcome after the transition. We constructed three types of adaptation processes to describe this development of roles and the resulting relationship outcomes.

The current study has some limitations which should be acknowledged. The trans population is a relatively small and hidden group within society. Sampling partners or former partners of trans individuals presents some challenges. Representativeness is difficult to achieve as we have little information on the population of trans people and their family and romantic lives. Our sample mainly included partners of trans women, while previous studies have often focused on the relationship between trans men and their partners (Brown, 2010; Pfeffer, 2010; Theron & Collier, 2013), finding that trans men tend to have more stable relationships than trans women (Lewins, 2002). Since our findings are extracted from a sample that mainly included partners of trans women, generalizations with respect to all partners in trans relationships should be made with caution. Finally, as participation was voluntary and the sample was obtained by a convenience snowball method, we can assume there is bias toward respondents who were willing to tell their story.

The findings presented here raise new questions for future research. We have mainly focused on possible role ambiguity and role conflict within the couple or family. How do other factors outside the family challenge or enhance the experience of partners? How is the taking up of roles influenced by the social context? If so, does this mean that the different adaptation processes discussed here are subject to historical and cultural contexts? Finally, since we focused on the experiences of partners by adapting concepts from role theory, we could assume that trans partners themselves also experience role ambiguity and role conflict during their transition. A similar analysis could be undertaken for trans partners themselves and raises the question of how the adaptation process of both partners influence each other.

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