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### ***“Becoming Nicole” Essay***

The book “Becoming Nicole”, written by Amy Ellis Nutt and published in 2015, is a narrative about the transition of the transgender girl Nicole who was born as a boy named Wyatt. She and her twin brother Jonas were adopted and raised by Kelly and Wayne Maines since they were unable to have biological children. They seemed to be a normal family until Nicole started to notice that she is a girl born in a boy’s body. After a lot of highs and lows, Nicole seemed to find her way as accepting and being accepted as a transgender woman. The book talks about the difficult path of Nicole and the transformation that occurred in the entire family.

I am going to take a closer look at the character Wayne Maines, who is the father of twin siblings, from the lens of the “ecological”, also called “systems theory”. First, it has to be clarified what the ecological theory is before applying it to “Becoming Nicole”. After that I will examine my understanding of cultural narratives related to gender and how it transformed through reading the book. The main point of the ecological theory is the relationship between a person and his environment. I will observe two of the three primary components: The person-environment fit and adaptations. The person-environment fit suggests that cultural and historical influences impact roles and manners and lead to social functioning. Adaptions are changes that the individual makes in order to maintain the connection between themselves and their environment.

First of all, the person-environment fit becomes apparent when looking at how Wayne Maines was raised as a child, adolescent, and young adult. It emphasizes the interaction between characteristics of the individual and the environment. Wayne was raised in a typical American family in the 1970's. He grew up in the village of Hagaman in New York, which was very old-fashioned and rural at that time. Both of his parents worked a lot in order to provide for their family. His father, Bill, working in a carpet mill in Amsterdam and New York and his mother, Betty, having different jobs over the years had the consequence that Wayne's parents only spent little time with their child during his childhood and adolescence. Since he grew up in an American village, he was taught the common small-town values, which particularly include respect for the country and devotion to family. Even though no one in his family had a college degree, Wayne did a Bachelor of Science degree in natural resources at Cornell University and both a master's degree and doctorate in safety management at West Virginia University after joining the military. All these different factors contributed to Wayne's personality and personal view of the world. That can be observed later in his life, especially when he had to face special circumstances. In other words, Wayne's conservative and old-fashioned way of growing up impacted his reactions and views at the beginning of his daughter's transformation. When Nicole started to observe and talked about her experience of gender dysphoria, Wayne behaved very distanced, and even a little bit ashamed. He had this image of having sons with whom you can do boy's stuff in his head and everything he wanted was to have a "normal family". That was what he was exposed to when growing up in a small rural village and he was not familiar with gender identities and transgenderism. Wayne did not want to allow his child to be different than others and that is why he always wanted Nicole to act more like a boy. Disappointment, confusion, and anger are what he experienced and what led to him putting distance between him and the family.

Moreover, adaptations, which are processes an individual uses in order to maintain a level of fit between themselves and the environment, can be observed in Wayne when looking

at the story of Nicole's transformation. As explained above, the family father did neither support nor understand Nicole's development as a woman's transgender. At the beginning, Wayne was convinced that his child was not a transgender, and he was far from accepting it. In the middle of the story, there is a turn in his behavior and attitude towards his daughter. Wayne started to change his behavior so that it is easier to function in this situation and therefore adapt to the circumstances. The decisive moment happened the day of the court appearance when they found out whether their child was allowed to change the name to a girl's name. The situation did not look good for the Maines' family and that is when Wayne decided to speak up in front of the judge. It was the first time that he agreed on his child being allowed to make a full transition and therefore represented the beginning of showing public support for Nicole being a transgender. Wayne allowed himself to accept Nicole and that is why he even talked about it in front of other parents and his own mother and father. Moreover, he did everything to protect Nicole and support her with the issues in school with classmates and the Christian Civic League of Maine. All in all, he came to the realization that Nicole's beliefs, behaviors, and attitudes were not going to change, regardless of his opinion towards having a transgender as his daughter. Also, Wayne figured out that he was the only one in Nicole's immediate surroundings who did not accept her for who she was. After all, her brother Jonas was happy to have a sister and her mother Kelly was Nicole's biggest supporter throughout the years.

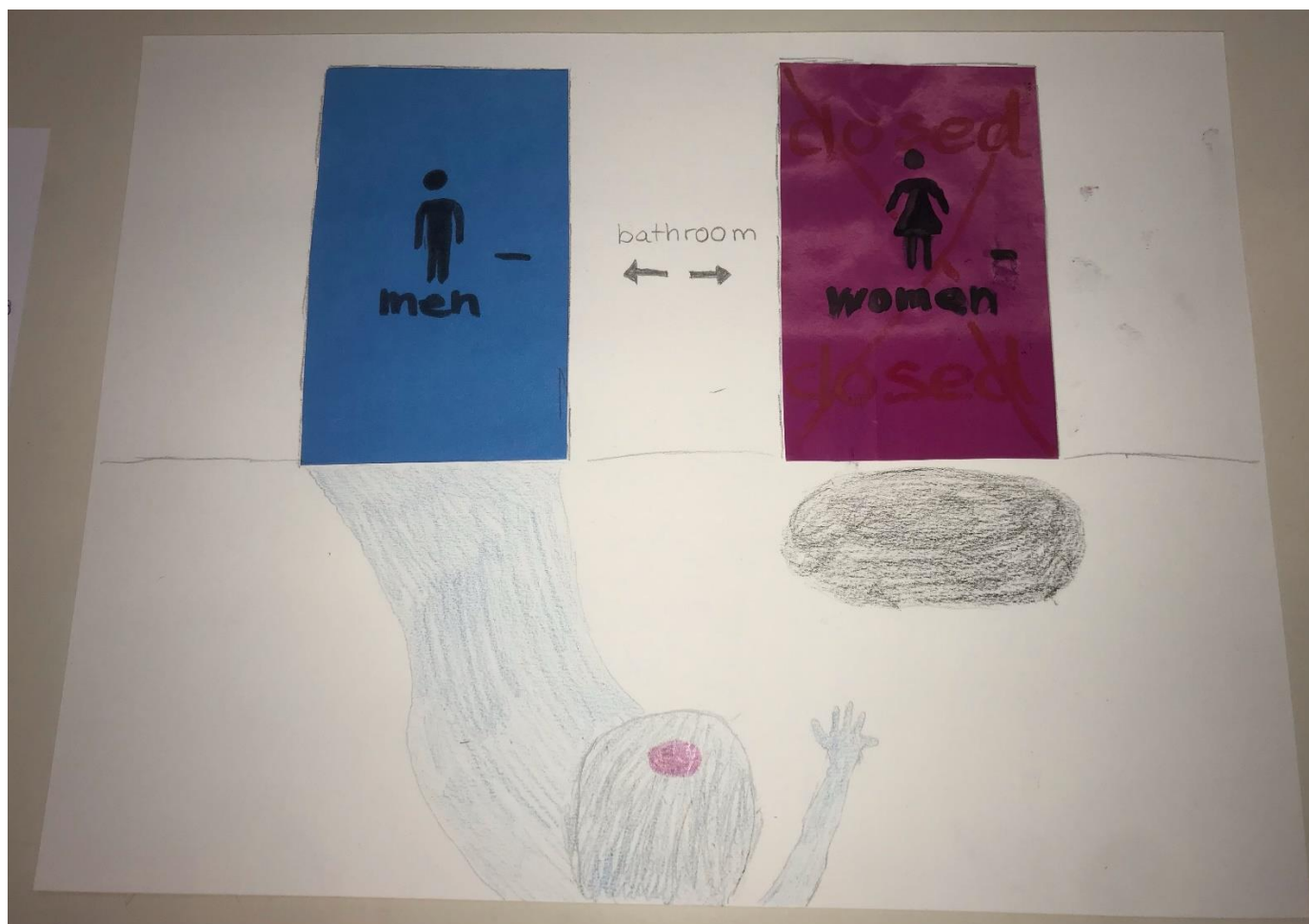
Next, I will examine how my cultural narrative of gender has been transformed. I can say that my cultural narrative definitely changed due to reading Nutt's book "Becoming Nicole". Before reading it, I knew about the basic biology of boys and girls (boys are born with a XY chromosome and girls with a XX chromosome). Although growing up in, in my eyes, in an educated, liberal, and modern environment, I was taught that we are born as either a boy or a girl. Additionally, I was raised in a small city, and I was never in contact with anyone that stood out because of a discrepancy between their gender identity and their sex. As

a result of the Internet's development, I learned more about it. However, I have to admit that it never really aroused my interest, since it was not a topic in my social environment. I came to the conclusion that we often have a black-white thinking and that counts especially for themes like gender. If we take a closer look at the biological factors, it will become clear that there is more variety than we assume. For instance, there are people who are born chromosomally male (XY) but have a female outward appearance and both male and female sex organs. The main lesson that I was taught by reading the book is that genitals and gender identity are not the same.

There is another aspect in the book that made me overthink my personal cultural narrative concerning gender. I am talking about the stereotypes that are associated with gender. Even though Nicole fits the stereotype of a trans girl liking typical girl stuff like dolls and feminine clothes, I came to the following findings. Why are we so focused on specific stereotypes related to girls and boys? Who even decides what is considered as feminine or male? I am of the opinion that we should give up these stereotypes in order to let everyone develop individually without this immense influence from outside. I believe that girls can do activities and behave like a boy is "supposed to", and that boys can do activities and behave like a girl is "supposed to", even though not being trans. We should rather see it as gender-neutral without connecting everything to one specific gender. At this point, the next question arises. This is especially important for people that are intersexual and therefore born with both feminine and male features. Should a person born with the chromosomes of a boy and the sex organs of a girl dress and behave like a girl only because of their outward female appearance? I learned that we have to be more open to different gender identities and natural biological phenomena and stop black and white thinking such as "that is what makes a girl and that is what makes a boy".

**Work cited**

Nutt, Amy E. *Becoming Nicole: The Transformation of an American Family.*, 2015. Random House Publishers.



I created an image/symbol of the bathroom situation in "Becoming Nicole". Nicole wanted to go to the girl's bathroom in school, but she was not allowed to. The main aspects you can see in the image are Nicole standing in front of the bathroom, and both the men's and women's bathroom. I colored Nicole's <sup>entire</sup> body blue but a pink spot in the middle of her head. That is because she is in a boy's body while identifying as a girl. The boy's bathroom is open and there is a path that leads to it. The girl's bathroom, however, is closed and there is a hole in front of the bathroom. This is a symbol for the fact that there is no way for Nicole to go to the girl's bathroom. Moreover, she is reaching out for the door of the girl's bathroom because she is forced to go into the boy's bathroom.