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Families in Transition: A Literature Review

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Abstract

Research on the transgender population is often limited to their medical care, and in particular to their mental well-being. The social and family environment in which a social gender role transition takes place is often overlooked. Although research is limited, this article reviews the existing literature on the family aspect of a gender transition. Articles regarding three different aspects were selected for this review: first, the issue of parenthood during transition and the experiences of children with a transgender parent; second, the experiences of partners and ex-partners of transgender individuals; and third, the experiences of parents with a gender variant child. Articles were restricted to those with a focus on family members and situations during transition. For all three contexts, several mediating factors, both individual and social, were distinguished. Various challenges for future research were identified.

Keywords: *Transgender, LGBTQI families, transgender parenthood, transgender youth, partner of a transgender person*

Introduction

A transgender individual is a person whose gender identity does not correspond with their birth-assigned sex. Research on the transgender population is often limited to their medical care and in particular their mental well-being. Sociological research concerning transgender individuals is relatively scarce and mostly dominated by theoretical considerations on gender and how gender identity and gender transition are socially constructed (Mason-Schrock, 1996; West & Zimmerman, 1987). The social and family environment in which a gender transition takes place was in the past often overlooked (Hines, 2006; Whitley, 2013). The present literature review provides an overview of the research on the family aspects of gender transition, with attention to three different aspects: first, the issue of parenthood during transition and the experiences of children with a transgender parent; second, the experiences of partners and ex-partners of transgender people; and third, the experiences of parents with a gender variant child.

As the transgender population has become more visible in various countries during recent years, there has been increased research activity concerning transgender people and their living conditions (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2014; Keuzenkamp, 2012; Morton, 2008; Takács, 2006; Turner, Whittle, & Combs, 2009; Vennix, 2010; Whittle, Turner, & Al-Alami, 2007; Whittle, Turner, Combs, & Rhodes, 2008). The issue of being transgender is becoming more common conversational subject generally within society as well. Transgender people may be viewed as a gender minority and, like other sexual minorities (homosexual, lesbian, and bisexual people), have to deal with a hetero-normative society where people are assumed to be either a man or a woman, and to be heterosexual. Those who do not fit into this rigid framework are often subject to stigmatisation (Carrera-Fernández, Lameiras-Fernández, & Rodríguez-Castro, 2013; Dierckx, Motmans, Meier, Dieleman, & Pezeril, 2014; Herek, 2007; Keuzenkamp & Kuyper, 2013; Kuyper, 2012; Walch, Ngamake, Francisco, Stitt, & Shingler, 2012). Hetero-normative values also interfere in the context of the family. For people who are lesbian, gay or bisexual (LGB), coming out can have an impact on the family; in a similar way, trans people and their families may create challenges for each other through gender transitions and hetero-normative expectations (Israel, 2005). Several issues may arise in the

family context. Transgender parents can challenge the link between biology and social parental roles: for example, how can a woman be a father (Grenier, 2006; Hines, 2006)? When a partner is coming out as transgender, confusion concerning the sexual orientation of both partners can arise (Israel, 2005). Furthermore, parents can have a hard time when their gender variant child is different from what they may have envisaged (Di Ceglie & Thümmel, 2006).

Method

The paper is based on a literature review of mostly Western European and US-based clinical and social studies, since internationally published studies outside Western Europe and the US regarding the family aspects of gender transition are nearly non-existent. One of the selected research papers on partners of trans men was conducted in South-Africa.

A search process was conducted in the *Web of Science* whereby the term “transgender” was combined with “family” or “parent”, “children”, or “partner”. Only papers with a specific focus on the transgender population and their family contexts, and in which gender transition was the subject of the article, were selected for this review. In total, 41 studies - empirical research papers (38) as well as theoretical reviews (3) - on the topic of trans families were selected. In the present article, we defined trans families as families in which one member made a social gender role change. In most clinical studies, such a transition in adults was accompanied by medical interventions such as cross-sex hormonal treatment and gender affirmative surgery.

In addition, a general search process was conducted through Google to include relevant information and knowledge on trans families outside the academic field. Two guides for trans families, one American and one Flemish, were added to the reviewed selection (COLAGE Kids of Trans Resource Guide, n; Genderstichting, n).

In the following section we first give an overview of the studies on parenthood during a gender transition, and the few described experiences of the children of transgender parents (15 research sources). Second, we provide a brief overview of the experiences of partners and ex-partners of trans

people (15 research sources). Third, we present research covering the experiences of families with a gender variant child (11 research sources).

Literature Review

Transgender parents

According to various survey data, 25% to 49% of the transgender population have children. The prevalence of parenthood tends to be higher among trans women than among trans men (Motmans, Ponnet, & De Cuypere, 2014; Rosser, Oakes, Bockting, & Miner, 2007; Sales, 1995; Stotzer, Herman, & Hasenbush, 2014). People who 'come out' as transgender later in their life are more likely to be parents than those who identify as transgender at younger ages (Rosser et al., 2007; Stotzer et al., 2014). Transgender persons with children are therefore generally older than transgender individuals without children (Pyne, Bauer, & Bradley, 2015).

Not all transgender parents live with their children (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2014). One straightforward explanation is where adult children have left home. In addition, however, several studies show that transgender parents are sometimes subject to discrimination in formal custody battles (Lynch & Murray, 2000; Pyne et al., 2015; Stotzer et al., 2014). Several authors suggest that this discrimination stems from the hetero-normative social model wherein a co-residing married heterosexual couple who are the biological parents of their children is still seen as the 'ideal' family type (Patterson & Hastings, 2007; Short, Riggs, Perlesz, Brown, & Kane, 2007), with the assumption that children with a transgender parent would experience negative influences on the development of their gender identity, sexual orientation, and overall well-being. When faced with the issue of child custody, courts often interpret the "best interests of the child" in a hetero-normative way that perpetuates a single homogenous view of what a family should look like (Chang, 2002).

Besides two theoretical and legal reviews on the issue of trans parenthood (Chang, 2002; Stotzer et al., 2014), the literature selected here on transgender parenthood mainly focuses on the experiences of the transitioning parent (eight research sources); the other parent, who is probably cisgender (not transgender) (two research sources); or describes the experiences of children through the eyes of one

of the parents or significant others in the transition process (one research source), for example therapists (White & Ettner, 2004). Studies focusing on the direct experiences of a child of a transgender parent are rare. In this review, we selected two research sources that interviewed children with a transgender parent. The majority of the research papers (nine) contained qualitative data gained through interviews and family assessments. Four research papers presented results from quantitative research.

The hetero-normative concern that children of transgender parents would display atypical gender behaviour, gender identity and/or sexual orientation was not clinically proven in a clinical study with 37 children of homosexual and transgender parents (Green, 1978, 1998). This does not imply that the gender transition of a parent is a neutral event, although it may be. Often a wide range of emotions may be present. Emotions described in the mostly qualitative empirical literature are that the gender transition of a parent can cause feelings of loss (Haines et al., 2014; Sales, 1995) and grief, sometimes similar to mourning (Di Ceglie, 1998; Lightfoot, 1998; Sales, 1995); betrayal (Sales, 1995); and shame (Church et al., 2014). Children of transgender parents described in therapy how watching one of their parents transition may be a uniquely challenging experience for a child who probably knows no one in a similar situation (White & Ettner, 2007). This means that the social environment is often inadequate to cope with the issue and the specific needs of the child (Di Ceglie, 1998; Haines, Ajayi, & Boyd, 2014; Veldorale-Griffin, 2014).

Several risk and protective factors for children in this unique situation are described in the current literature. First the (developmental) age of the child seems to be of importance. Younger children seem more accepting than older or adult children (Bischof et al., 2011; Veldorale-Griffin, 2014; White & Ettner, 2004, 2007). Teenagers who were interviewed on their experiences were especially likely to personalise the transition of their parent (White & Ettner, 2004). Such increased sensitivity during adolescence is sometimes ascribed to adolescent egocentrism and particularly the notion of the “imaginary audience”, which refers to the tendency of adolescents to exaggerate the degree to which they believe others are thinking about them (Reisbig, 2007).

A second observation in the literature was the importance of an amicable and good quality relationship between different family members - even if the parents were separated, and whether or not this separation was caused by the coming out of the transgender parent. Transphobic attitudes in the non-transgender parent were unsurprisingly found to have an important influence on the relationship between the parents, and consequently on the well-being of the children (Freedman, Tasker, & di Ceglie, 2002; Haines et al., 2014; Hines, 2006; White & Ettner, 2004, 2007). Likewise, agreement between the parents about how to inform the child(ren) about the parent's transgender status had an overall positive effect on the well-being of both parents and children (Grenier, 2006). In this matter, the possibility of open communication, in which there is space for questions and uncertainty, helped facilitate a good relationship between family members (Hines, 2006; Vanderburgh, 2009).

A third important experience mentioned by several empirical studies was social stigmatisation. Children with a transgender parent may experience difficulties due to transphobia in society (Freedman et al., 2002; Haines et al., 2014; Reisbig, 2007). In an Irish study, some transgender parents reported that their children would not allow them to be seen with them in public, nor have any contact with their friends (Church et al., 2014). Teenagers especially tended to report difficulties with being open in public about the trans identity of their parent (White & Ettner, 2004). In the online survey research of Veldorale-Griffin in which parents and adult children were questioned about their experience, the fear of stigmatisation and bullying was the most common stress factor among the adult child respondents (Veldorale-Griffin, 2014). Other research revealed that children often use coping strategies to deal with such social stigmatisation (e.g. limited disclosure at school) and transgender parents said they helped their children to cope with transphobic behaviour (Haines et al., 2014). Conversely, children could also often be a big support for the transgender parent during transition (Veldorale-Griffin, 2014). Various studies mentioned the importance of mediating persons such as (ex-)partners, siblings, other family members, supportive allies, teachers and school environments in establishing and maintaining non-hetero-normative attitudes (Cloughessy & Waniganayake, 2013; Haines et al., 2014; Hines, 2006; Reisbig, 2007; Veldorale-Griffin, 2014; White & Ettner, 2004). Veldorale-Griffin found that psychotherapy was an important source of support. However, both

children and parents experienced a lack of trans-friendly and knowledgeable therapists; and a lack of support groups for the children of transgender parents was emphasised (Veldorale-Griffin, 2014).

Other factors that may negatively or positively influence the experience of having a transgender parent are: the gender of the child, if this is the same as the birth sex of the transparent (Lightfoot, 1998; White & Ettner, 2004); an abrupt separation from either parent; mental problems of either parent (Sales, 1995; White & Ettner, 2004); how the parents themselves cope mentally with the transition (Lev, 2004; Sales, 1995); and finally, the broader ideas and values that the child has inherited from his or her parents, community and culture (Israel, 1997; Veldorale-Griffin, 2014)

Furthermore, a difference between female and male parents was noticed, with the gender transition of trans men being more easily accepted by the child because of greater cultural acceptance of female androgyny compared to male femininity (Hines, 2006). Additionally, the degree to which the transgender parent is able to 'pass' is a factor in the adjustment process of the child. Lewins stated that 'passing' for trans women is often more challenging than for trans men (Lewins, 2002).

Lastly, various authors mention that the adjustment and reaction of the child to the transition of the parent is not a static situation, but a process. Lev (2004) and Emerson (1996) both described different stages in the reaction and adjustment of families where a parent comes out as transgender (Emerson, 1996; Lev, 2004). Veldorale-Griffin added that this is not just a process that family members undergo individually, but that the transition of a parent is a family and relational process (Veldorale-Griffin, 2014).

Being the (ex-) partner of a transgender person

The coming out as transgender by one partner during marriage can be a shock for the partner and is repeatedly described to result in relationship dissolution (Israel, 2005; White & Ettner, 2004), although this is not necessarily the case (Bischof, Warnaar, Barajas, & Dhaliwal, 2011; Meier, Sharp, Michonski, Babcock, & Fitzgerald, 2013). In a European survey, 7 % of the transgender persons were divorced, compared to a mean marital and registered partnership rate of 15%. A US study described a divorce rate of 12.3% and a marital and registered partnership rate of 19.5% (Rosser et al., 2007).

Divorce rates tended to be higher among trans women than among trans men (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2014). Most of the research papers (12) contained qualitative data gained through interviews and family and couple assessments, while three research papers presented results from quantitative research.

Couple assessments showed that partners were likely to experience emotions such as stress, grief, anger, betrayal, loneliness and fear after their partners came out as transgender (Zamboni, 2006). Partners were sometimes found to struggle also with their own sexual orientation and gender identity. They seemed frequently to experience the need to confirm the new gender identity of their partner by reaffirming their own gender identity through expressing gender stereotypical behaviour themselves (Bischof et al., 2011; Brown, 2009; Harvey, 2008; Israel, 2005; Joslin-Roher & Wheeler, 2009; Theron & Collier, 2013; Whitley, 2013).

As mentioned before, relationship dissolution is not inevitable. Several intermediating factors were distinguished in the acceptance and adjusting process of the non-transitioning partner. First, the way the transitioning partner came out was shown to affect how his or her partner reacted. Interviews with partners showed that when the disclosure was a gradual process, the non-transitioning partner often experienced 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). In couple assessments, where the cisgender partner knew about the transgender feelings of their partner for a longer time and had been tolerating their cross-gender behaviour in the private sphere, the decision to transition could feel as if the rules of the relationship had changed (Samons, 2009).

A second factor was the degree to which the cisgender partner experienced the transgender partner as self-centred. Various studies suggest that partners may need to feel that they are involved in the transition process and the disclosure process towards their children and other people outside the family (Bischof et al., 2011; Harvey, 2008). Partners may need to have the time and space to adapt and to renegotiate their own identity in a now visibly transgender relationship (Brown, 2009).

Third, the quality of the relationship and the presence of other marital conflicts - unrelated to the transgender issue – were found to have an impact on the reaction of the partner to the disclosure by the transgender partner. When rigid gender roles were the norm in the relationship in the past, a gender transition could be problematic in that it challenged the traditional gender expectations (Israel, 2005; Samons, 2009). Former gay or lesbian couples sometimes experience a sense of loss of the LGB community when they used to be involved in LGB organisations (Harvey, 2008; Joslin-Roher & Wheeler, 2009). Lastly, various studies revealed that partners of people who make a gender transition experience a lack of psychological and informational support for themselves. Peer support and support of family and friends appear to be an important positive factor for partners (Bischof et al., 2011; Joslin-Roher & Wheeler, 2009; Theron & Collier, 2013).

Besides a number of different emotional and sometimes negative experiences of non-transitioning partners, some studies mention positive aspects of having a transgender partner, such as developing more effective communication strategies, and an increase in the well-being of the transgender partner, that increased the level of satisfaction within the relationship (Harvey, 2008).

Parents of transgender youth and gender variant children

During recent years, there has been increased attention on young transgender people. Consequently, there is a significant amount of literature on the parents of transgender youth, although social research on transgender adolescents and gender variant children and their siblings is nearly non-existent (one research source) (Toomey & Richardson, 2009). Most of the research papers reviewed here (eight) are presenting qualitative data; three research papers present results from quantitative research. The research that is published on transgender youth and their parents shows striking similarities with the experiences of the families with transgender parents. It shows that the families of transgender youths may also experience a wide range of emotions such as loss and grief as their child becomes someone different from whom they had envisaged. A sense of shame, due to social stigmatisation, is also reported. Highly negative reactions by parents, and sometimes even rejection of their child, can take place and is mentioned in different articles (Di Ceglie & Thümmel, 2006; Hill, Menvielle, Sica, & Johnson, 2010; Menvielle, Tuerk, & Jellinek, 2002; Riley, Sitharthan, Clemson, & Diamond, 2011).

Empirical studies show that parents of a transgender youth face very specific challenges. Parents may struggle between acceptance for the sake of the well-being of their child, and struggling with the safety of their child in a social context where gender non-conformity is often stigmatised. A typical experience of the parents of transgender youth found in qualitative interviews is the perception of responsibility. Because of their parental status, they may feel responsible and guilty, which is often affirmed by social judgments of their parenting decisions, and the subsequent secondary stigmatisation (stigma toward the social environment by association or courtesy stigma) that parents face (Di Ceglie & Thümmel, 2006; Johnson & Benson, 2014; Kivalanka, Weiner, & Mahan, 2014; Malpas, 2011; Riley et al., 2011). This responsibility may lead to a feeling of helplessness in the face of their child's struggle. In some families, a conflict occurred between the parental imperative to adapt their child to social gender norms, and the desire to nurture their child's uniqueness and accept his or her atypical gender expressions (Malpas, 2011). This conflict can lead to the fear of being judged as a bad parent when accepting gender non-conforming behaviour or preferences (e.g. female clothes for a birth-assigned male). Additionally, a lack of information and knowledge, and experiences with uninformed health professionals, can cause stress for the parents (Kivalanka et al., 2014; Menvielle et al., 2002).

Relational and co-parenting conflicts may occur in families with a gender variant child when one partner accepts the gender non-conforming behaviour of the child, and the other parent feels anxious and wants to protect stereotypical gender norms (Hill & Menvielle, 2009; Malpas, 2011). One reason mentioned in the literature is that the gender identity of children may often be seen as "the job of the mothers" (Riley et al., 2011). For example, Kivalanka and colleagues found, in qualitative interviews with five mothers of gender variant children, that fathers took longer to understand and accept their children's gender identity. Fathers were more worried about safety and protection, while mothers emphasised more their unconditional love, nurture, and acceptance. This does not mean, however, that these mothers could not also experience frustration and fear regarding their gender variant child (Kivalanka et al., 2014).

Having a transgender child in the family was found to have an impact on the whole family. In several studies, this collective aspect was expressed. As described before, a transition is a gradual process

(Kovalanka et al., 2014). After the possible “shock” of discovery, research showed that parents often gradually come to terms with having a gender variant child, as their awareness of their child’s circumstances and needs grows (Riley et al., 2011).

As before, a general lack of (professional) support was often missed. Different studies conclude the need for specific professional support for these families. Additionally, the need to meet people in similar situations in order to be able to share experiences was described in several studies (Di Ceglie & Thümmel, 2006; Grossman, D’Augelli, Howell, & Hubbard, 2005; Johnson & Benson, 2014; Kovalanka et al., 2014; Malpas, 2011; Menvielle et al., 2002). This is especially important because family acceptance is shown to have a strong positive influence on the transgender youth’s emotional and behavioural health (Ryan, Russell, Huebner, Diaz, & Sanchez, 2010).

Conclusion

The research on families in transition is rather limited compared to other research domains within transgender studies. Nevertheless, we were able to distinguish some relevant findings in the current body of knowledge:

With respect to transgender parenthood, the existing research did not provide evidence for the assumption that children with a transgender parent develop atypical gender behaviour, gender identity, and/or sexual orientation, nor do they experience mental health problems. However, there are indications that children of transgender parents may experience difficulties related to family conflict, peer relations, and social stigmatisation. Regarding relationships, the existing research suggested that coming out as transgender can result in relationship dissolution, but also identified couples who stayed together. Literature on transgender youth suggested that raising a transgender child may be challenging, and was often accompanied by feelings of guilt, responsibility, and relational conflict.

Witnessing someone you love transitioning can be an emotional, intense and often lonely experience. A wide range of emotions are described during the transition. A supportive environment seemed essential in the process of acceptance and adjustment towards a transgender family member. However, hetero-normative social environments seemed not always well-placed to cope with the challenges of a

gender transition, and the transgender person and his or her family may thus need specific professional support which is often still reported to be missing. In particular, support for the children of transgender parents seems nearly non-existent (Stotzer et al., 2014).

Whether it is a parent, partner or child who is transgender, most research underlines the relational aspects of transition; a transition is never just an individual process. Different studies on transgender families conclude that it is a family process which involves quality of parenting, the psychosocial well-being of parents, the co-operation and harmony between parents, and the quality of relationships and daily interactions. These qualitative aspects of relationships may be of more importance than the family structure (i.e. number, gender, sexuality, and co-habitation status of parents) in determining transgender and other family member's well-being and 'outcomes'. This conclusion is similar to findings in research on same-sex parented families. (Patterson, 2006; Short et al., 2007).

There are several limitations and constraints regarding the existing literature on transgender families. Most studies focus on the experiences of transgender parents, gender variant youth and their families and, to a lesser extent, the partners of transgender people. Children with a transgender parent are an understudied research topic. None of the studies in our review interviewed young children (minors) of transgender parents themselves.

A significant number of relationships dissolve when one partner comes out as transgender. One of the many challenges of research concerning transgender parenthood is to distinguish the consequences of the transition of a transgender parent per se, from other issues such as the breakdown of the relationship, separation from one of the parents, and family conflict. Several studies mentioned in this literature review state that adequate help and support for families with a transgender member is often missing. Future research needs to investigate what kind of support these families may need. When parents or partners stay together during a gender transition, the intimate and sexual relationship is also still rather understudied.

The literature review presented here may be valuable for all who study and work with trans families. However, the limitations show that the challenges for future research on trans families are various and concern the nature of the research object and topic, methodology, research design and assumptions.

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