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Disrupting Cisnormativity: Decentering Gender in Families

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Within the last decade, researchers and activists in the sphere of transgender and gender non-binary (TGNB) persons have documented a burgeoning vocabulary and evolving perspectives. Families of TGNB persons are often challenged to re-evaluate understandings of gender, of sexuality, and the family unit itself. The conceptual model of decentering cisnormativity allows researchers to analyze when tensions grow taut as society members are confronted with gender nonconformity. Parents often undergo transformation when they choose to explore these tensions, as they deconstruct their assumptions about gender, and critically reflect on their underlying biases, belief systems, values, and understandings. In this way, it is not only TGNB children who transition, but also those around them (Malpas, 2017) as their belief systems and social constructions of gender are called into question.

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Since the turn of the century, a growing generation of gender fluid, gender queer, non-binary, transgender, transsexual, “Born This Way” (Lady Gaga, 2011) youth and young adults (Shumer, Nokoff, & Spack, 2016; Spack, 2013) have disrupted *cisnormativity*, the traditional binary system of male and female gender. Considerable debate roils on regarding nurture versus nature (Bau & Schaub, 2011; Diamond, 2006; Garcia-Falgueras & Swaab, 2008; Russo, 2016), but whether *transgender and gender non-binary* (TGNB) people were “born this way” or not, they have forged ahead making connections with one another on the internet in chatrooms, forums, Tumblr, and face-to-face in community and school club support groups. There is also evidence to suggest that parents of these emboldened youth have inadvertently prepared them to assert themselves; parents born in the 1960s-1970s are more likely to raise children, especially daughters, to value autonomy, independence, individualism, personal gratification, and self-expression (Alwin, 1990; Pearlman, 2006). Moreover, today there is vocabulary for transgender identity and issues, advanced medical and surgical technology, and insurance companies willing to cover the costs of surgery, partially or in full (Pearlman, 2006). Of course, while the younger generation “come out” as transgender, many parents face an emotional or ethical crisis and reach out to support groups with the heart to understand, but a head steeped in confusion and grief. With their child a few steps (or many steps) ahead of them, parents embark on a journey, a transformative one for many, that challenges their notions of what is “normal.” While some family members ultimately reject their child’s transition, as the disproportionately high rate of homeless TGNB youth attests (Kattari & Begun, 2017; Pyne, 2011), others re-emerge with a new understanding of

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what it means to be family. Through the lens of queer and transgender theory, I turned to research to better understand why some family members reacted positively to a family member's disclosure while others reacted with negativity or even with violence. I analyzed the TGNB "coming out" experience as it disrupts cisnormativity by decentering gender, sexuality, and the family itself. It is because of this lack of equilibrium, this sense of vertigo, that family members need time to examine gender, its implications for the family, and the powerful need to appease the status quo.

The Complexity of Gender

Oswald, Blume, and Marks (2011) wrote an article for family science scholars to challenge them to deconstruct the ideology of heteronormativity by disrupting gender, sexuality, and the family unit. For this article, I would like to apply their approach to cisnormativity. The acronym for transgender/gender non-binary—TGNB will be used to be "inclusive of the spectrum of individuals whose assigned sex at birth does not align with their own sense of gender identity and those who do not conform to social gender norms" (McGuire, Kovalanka, Catalpa, & Toomey, 2016, p. 60). I experienced the transition of my TGNB teenage son, and later led a Parents, Friends and Family of Lesbian and Gays (PFLAG) support group for parents of TGNB children of all ages in which I witnessed an array of reactions from parents to their child's "coming out" and subsequent transition. Gender transition, or simply transition, is the "process of changing outwardly . . . to present themselves with their gender identity" (Brill & Kenney, 2016, p. 315). This may include a social transition through social gender markers such as clothing and hairstyles, a medical transition with the use of medicine or hormones, a surgical transition when the body itself is modified, a legal transition through officially changing identification, or any combination of these (Brill & Kenney, 2016). Some parents who attended the PFLAG support group came only once, some came devastated and burdened with a deep sense of loss, while others needed support and education but were ultimately relieved that their child had found happiness within their authentic self. Cisnormativity, the "assumption that all those born male will naturally become men, and all those born female will naturally become women" (Pyne, 2011), was disrupted at the discovery or disclosure of their child's gender variance. Certainly, the distress of the child or the parents' own inability to grapple with the implications brought them to the support group. They, even more than parents of lesbian and gay children, have a "more prolonged, complex, and difficult course of adjustment and reconciliation—one compounded by greater stigmatization and shame as well as the actual loss of a [child]" (Pearlman, 2006). With regard to transition, parents of TGNB youth face the unique situation of making serious decisions regarding hormone blockers, cross-sex hormones, sex reassignment surgery, and a very public transition that will undoubtedly invite public judgement, emotional turmoil, and possible physical harm. Despite the tangible concerns for parents of TGNB families, parents' reactions to their child's disclosure are as diverse as their children—some deeply mourn the loss of their child, others outright reject them, and still others need only some education to guide their child through the next few years of change. One group of parents, coined gender-subversive parents by Ryan (2016), welcome gender nonconformity in their homes. Unlike gender-expansive parents, the term Ryan used for the majority of mothers in her study whose journey with gender was most often led by their child, gender-subversive moms tended to have prior TGNB friends, were highly educated, and had liberal ideological leanings before having children. Thus, these parents could, while supporting their child's gender experience, actively disrupt dominant gender norms. For my experience as a support group leader, all parents I met fell into the category of gender-expansive parent.

Gender Construction and Confinement

Gender, it has been argued, is largely developed through socialization; that is, we are socialized to “perform” gender (Butler, 2004; McGuire et al., 2016). Manspreading, for instance, or the male act of sitting and spreading his legs wide, is gender performance. Conversely, a woman has learned to “perform” her gender by crossing her legs. These acts are but two performances that are either implicitly or explicitly reinforced or discouraged within a particular society. Judith Butler (2004) described gender as a “practice of improvisation within a scene of constraint” (p. 1), and it is within this “scene of constraint” that we are judged on our performance (Wahlig, 2015). Gender is how we organize relationships, create meaning, identify people, and, as suggested by Hausman (2001), it is an “epistemology for knowing and understanding the operation of culture in defining identities” (Nagoshi & Brzuzy, 2010, p. 432). This organizational binary system of male and female, is maintained by a system of power (Butler, 2004). This cultural power of gender is reinforced through emotional and physical harm to the offender, that is, any person who fails to perform gender. Breaking these gender rules “can be a profound threat to the established order, extremely provoking and personally threatening, or unsettling in ways that often seem beyond reason” (Pearlman, 2006, p. 94). Butler (2004) argued that “norms determine who is human and who is not, which lives are livable, which are not” and this power “demeans the complex ways in which gendered lives are crafted and lived” (p. 4). When one is transgender, when one breaks gender roles or crosses gender boundaries (Nagoshi & Brzuzy, 2010), the “harassment suffered . . . cannot be underestimated” (Butler, 2004, p. 6), and it is because of this that many parents of TGNB children seek counselling and support. Their own socialized prejudices, judgments, and fears are often at odds with their values, their love of the child, and their need to do what is ultimately best for their child.

Gendered Losses and Ambiguous Loss

It is not surprising then that parents came to my support group distraught, having felt the decentering of gender in their families. While there were many reasons for parents experiencing distress, most of them were due to fears developed from this system of enforcing gender norms and losing the dreams they had created for their sons and daughters. Of parents’ fears and frustrations, the most frequently discussed in counselling (Ritenour, 2014) were those related to the loss of dreams for their child (such as bearing a child), loss of certain rites of passage (walking his daughter down the aisle), or the grief at having “lost” their daughter or son (to the opposite gender). *Ambiguous loss* (Boss, 2000), the intersection of the family experience of loss with the added stress of ambiguity (Wahlig, 2015), was felt deeply by some who grieved the “death” of their child’s gender (such as removing pictures from the walls) or had difficulty reconciling that the physical child before them was indeed the same person they thought they knew before the revelation (Ritenour, 2014). From my experience, most parents felt terribly alone, having no one to confide in about the transition, and many feared the rejection of their family members, friends, and social or religious groups; unfortunately, some did experience this rejection and shaming. Through the lens of queer theory, however, we can see the muscle of cisnormativity flexed here. Each fear and frustration can be classified into categories such as the socially created cisnormative dreams, the rigid enforcement of cisnormativity, or a combination of both. The dreams, for instance, tended to be the “losses”—the dream of having grandchildren, the closeness of a same gender child relationship, the loss of past memories a parent now feels uncomfortable sharing with those they meet. On the other hand, real and imagined fears of the enforcement of cisnormativity contribute to the loneliness one feels when they lack a support system or when a parent faces the

school, medical personnel, or social groups such as a church for the first time with their child. There is no predicting how people will react to gender transition—who will be for disrupting cisnormativity and who will be for enforcing it.

Most parents in my support group ultimately came to accept their child's transition, but some did not. At first, the fears and frustrations listed above were reasons enough for parents to hope this transition was all simply a phase (Pearlman, 2006). If the child is “consistent, insistent, and persistent,” however, then it is likely that transition will proceed. Subversive parents who willingly accepted their child's gender diversity had already witnessed the decentering of gender and were familiar with the concept of a gender spectrum. These parents are involved in “complex gendering” because of their ability to “resist or subvert stereotyping” and challenge the gender binaries (Oswald et al., 2011). Other parents who came to accept their child educated themselves on gender identity development and the spectrum of gender and were able to tolerate grey areas (Ritenour, 2014). Valuing a close relationship with their child, seeing to their happiness and well-being, and having a supportive network all aided in a parent's eventual acceptance of their child and resistance to cisnormativity (Ritenour, 2014).

Indeed, some parents were challenged to their limits. The parents in my support group who seemed to experience the greatest anxiety and sense of ambiguity were the parents of gender non-conforming children, children whose very being challenged the status quo. That is, children who were gender queer, gender fluid, bi-gender, non-gender, agender, etc. did not fit into the gender binary and, once they transitioned, they did not seamlessly blend into cisnormative society (Wahlig, 2015). Parents of these children were called upon to live in a state of gender disruption, rejecting “cultural ideas of masculinity and femininity” (McGuire et al., 2016, p. 62) instead of tolerating a transition that can be hid away. Some parents were unable to accept their child's transition because they ultimately upheld a biological essentialist view of a gender binary, they felt pressure from community or religious leaders, they lacked a supportive network, or they experienced extensive fear (Norwood, 2012; Wright-Maley, Davis, Gonzalez, & Colwell, 2016). Other parents were unable to separate the child's experience from their own experience, such as when a parent asked, “Why are you doing this to me?” (Pearlman, 2006, p. 115). For the most part, parents who were able to accept their child were the ones who could tolerate the decentering of gender long enough to educate themselves and then, for their child, challenge the status quo.

Gender and Sexuality: Distinct yet Connected

Not only is gender disrupted when TGNB children transition, but sexuality is often decentered, as well. Although over the last decade researchers have strived to separate the concept of gender and sexuality, the former identified as the cultural meaning we attach to gender and the latter one's sexuality, in life the two are often intertwined (McGuire et al., 2016; Nagoshi & Brzuzy, 2010; Oswald et al., 2011; Pearlman, 2006). Transgender theory purports that gender and sexuality are two distinct yet intersecting identities of TGNB people (Nagoshi & Brzuzy, 2010). Simply, if someone assigned female at birth who is attracted to males then transitions to male, he would now be labeled gay. While for many this is not problematic, for some family members homosexuality remains a challenging concept that disrupts heteronormativity. The notion of the transgender child as “trapped” in the body of the “opposite” gender has been a popular conceptualization of transgenderism in the West (Norwood, 2010). Consequently, many parents find that supporting a transition is an act of mercy, the key to fitting into a cisnormative society. An extreme example of this is when Iran famously legalized sex change operations in 1984 in an effort to aid citizens with *transition to hetero- and cisnormativity* (Najmabadi, 2014).

Homosexuality in Iran, however, remains a crime, often a capital offense. In Canada and the US, some family members also are willing to accept gender transition so long as one transitions into a binary society, upholding cisnormative culture, but they are uncomfortable with gender non-binary statuses and homosexuality (Norwood, 2010). They can accept the transition from one gender to another, hence realigning the binaries, but decentering sexuality pushes them too far.

Moreover, sexuality has also been found to be fluid. To extend the example above, when transitioning, a transgender male may begin testosterone shots and his social life may very well change (McGuire et al., 2016). This change of hormones and social life has been shown to influence sexuality, as well (McGuire et al., 2016). Instead of becoming gay, he may become bisexual, pansexual, asexual or queer, thus he decenters sexuality again. Therefore, in addition to gender being decentered when a TGNB person transitions, sexuality often disrupts heteronormativity and creates another dimension of adjustment for the parents.

From Family Crisis to Coping

The third area of possible cisnormative disruption is the traditional family itself. The family, which exists not only physically, but psychologically as well, needs to make meaning of this transition, and the meaning it makes will determine whether the family pulls together or pulls apart (Wahlig, 2015). This experience will test family conventions and norms, stretch them, and challenge their thinking with regard to gender, sexuality, and family. Each member is affected to varying degrees as the TGNB child may seem the same, and yet they are different, a living coexistence of male and female traits (Norwood, 2013). Often cisnormative privileges and roles change, disrupting the familial power dynamics (McGuire et al., 2016). *Boundary ambiguity* (Boss, 2000), “the sense that someone is still a part of the family—in or out, here or gone” (Allen, 2007) may be tenuous as each family member attempts to queer the traditional family unit. For some families, the boundaries are not wide enough to allow for such disruption and we find transgender teens and young adults homeless on the street (Grossman, D’Augelli, & Salter, 2006; Wahlig, 2015). The greater the boundary ambiguity within a family, the greater the stress on all members as they each untangle new identities, resolve conflicting notions of past and future selves, determine what the change means for them, and consider for themselves how gender is formed (Wahlig, 2015). Studies show that those who feel that gender is determined by, or partially determined by, biological causes are more apt to accept TGNB family members (Kupalanka, Weiner, & Mahan, 2014), whereas those who feel it is the TGNB person’s choice frequently feel it is selfish and immoral (Norwood, 2013). Although some studies suggest there is a biological element to gender (Garcia-Falgueras & Swaab, 2008; Olson-Kennedy et al., 2016; Russo, 2016), there is not enough evidence to prove that either biological elements or social construction is chiefly responsible for gender (Butler, 2004; McGuire et al., 2016). Without a verdict, families are left to make meaning for themselves, to make or prevent room for identity, role, and relationship changes (Norwood, 2013), and to decenter cisnormativity and, often, heteronormativity.

A Transformative Journey

The door to our support group was like a revolving door. At any one time we would have a newcomer, raw and tender, while another parent was doing battle between the myth of cisnormativity and the gender spectrum. One parent grasped decentering gender but struggled with ambiguous loss, the heart and head at odds. And then there was the parent who marveled that she was once that newcomer, overcome with grief, for now she volunteered as a TGNB advocate. Once the illusion of cisnormativity is exposed and family members understand that decentering gender

and sexuality need not deteriorate the family, the “disruption” of transition becomes less violent. Many who sat on our support group’s thread-worn couches demonstrated a complex mix of each of these values, some conflicting with another, and yet this was normal. Psychologist Sarah F. Pearlman (2006), whose research on the mothers of transgender sons speaks to most parents of TGNB children, shared that “grief and acceptance were neither mutually exclusive nor contradictory, but existed side-by-side, a normal response to condemnation, marginality, daughter-loss, and a transphobic, persecutory world” (p. 120). If it is indeed true that the past few generations of parents have instilled values within their children that have emboldened them to strive for autonomy, independence, individualism, personal satisfaction, and self-expression, then perhaps parents, too, will eventually appreciate the authentic child they have raised who is true to the self in ways that many in their generation thought impossible.

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