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S. Zadeh, S. Imrie, and S. Golombok

Centre for Family Research, University of Cambridge, UK

ABSTRACT

Scholarly attention has recently been given to the ways in which gender and parenting identities intersect, yet little is known about how children and adolescents with a trans* parent experience family life and relationships. This article reports data from a qualitative study in the UK based on interviews with 29 children and adolescents aged 5–18, all of whom have at least one parent who is trans*. Drawing upon theories of symbolic interactionism, the study investigated children and adolescents' meaning-making and experiences of family life and relationships in the context of their parent's gender identity. Data were analyzed using a theoretically informed thematic approach, which resulted in the identification of four main themes. Overall, findings suggest that parental gender identity does not adversely impact upon how children and adolescents perceive their relationship with their parent, but may be otherwise relevant to their experiences both within and outside of the home. Findings are discussed in relation to theories of family display (Finch, 2007) and discourse dependence (Galvin, 2006), suggesting that combining and extending these perspectives might be useful for understanding the perspectives of children and adolescents in different contexts of family diversity.

Introduction

It is estimated that there are between 200,000 and 500,000 trans* people in the UK, whose gender identity does not align with the sex they were assigned at birth (Government Equalities Office [GEO], 2018a). Although less is known about the number of parents within this total population, findings from a number of empirical studies worldwide suggest that approximately 20–50% of trans* people are also parents (James et al., 2016; Stotzer, Herman & Hasenbush, 2014). The parents who are captured by these statistics may have various gender identities, including but not limited to those who are agender, gender non-conforming, genderqueer, nonbinary, transgender, and individuals with a trans history. In this article, the term trans* is used to recognize this heterogeneity amongst parents who do not identify as cisgender. Similarly, 'transition' and 'gender transition' are used to denote the breadth of experiences amongst trans* parents who have in some way communicated their gender identity (which is not the sex they were assigned at birth) to their family members.[1] Although it is recognized that some trans* parents do not disclose their gender identity to their family members (Norwood, 2012; Ryan, 2009), we focus in this article on the views and experiences of children and adolescents who have been told about their parent's gender identity.

Literature review

Existing research into the familial (or broadly, relational) experiences of trans* people has tended to focus on the impact of transition on relationships within families of origin (e.g., Connolly, 2006; Koken, Bimbi, & Parsons, 2009), with romantic partners (e.g., Platt & Bolland, 2017; Whitley, 2013), and with friends (e.g., Whitley, 2013). Amongst family members, the disclosure of one's gender identity, whether to a spouse or indeed a parent, is rarely met with a neutral response (Connolly, 2006). The therapeutic literature documents feelings of grief, shame, anger and depression amongst the spouses and parents of trans* people (Granucci Lesser, 1999), while sociological studies suggest that gender transition may take on different meanings within different relational contexts (McGuire, Catalpa, Lacey, & Kuvalanka, 2016). For example, the parents of trans* children may report negative social and emotional experiences (Simpson, 2018), or levels of parental support for children's gender identity may be high (Norwood, 2012, 2013a). Amongst partners, gender transition may result in relationship breakdown, or the transformation of the couple relationship to something other than romantic, or the continuation of a positive romantic relationship (Haines, Ajayi, & Boyd, 2014; Norwood, 2012, 2013a, 2013b; Platt & Bolland, 2017; Pyne, 2012; Whitley, 2013). The most common explanation for such variation in family members' appraisals is that information about transition must be integrated into existing value systems that may be more or less accommodating of gender diversity (see e.g., Norwood, 2012, 2013a, 2013b).

Less is known about the experiences of families in which the trans* member is a parent (Biblarz & Savci, 2010). Some scholars have distinguished between those who communicate their trans* identity before having children, and those who first communicate their trans* identity as parents (Petit, Julien, & Chamberland, 2018). Overall, transition has been shown to lead to the disruption of gendered expectations of parenting, and the renegotiation of familial roles and relationships (Dierckx, Mortelmans, Motmans, & T'Sjoen, 2017; Haines et al. 2014; Hines, 2006; Norwood, 2012; Petit, Julien & Chamberland, 2017). For those who first communicate their trans* identity during parenthood, levels of familial breakdown have been shown to be high, and discrimination in formal custody disputes is evident (Cooper, 2013; Haines et al., 2014; Stotzer et al., 2014). The support of other family members, and in particular a child's second parent (where present), has been found to be fundamental to family functioning post-transition (Freedman, Tasker, & di Ceglie, 2002; Pyne, 2012). In some cases, parents have 'de-transitioned' (Church, O'Shea, & Lucey, 2014; Haines et al., 2014), owing to a lack of such support. Children may fear that a parent's gender transition will lead to family breakdown (Dierckx et al., 2017), and in families for which that is the case, parents' reports indicate that children have responded negatively, or have mixed feelings, about their transition (Freedman et al., 2002).

However, acceptance of a family member's gender identity is no longer uncommon (Church et al., 2014; Freedman et al., 2002; Grant et al., 2011), and it is noteworthy, although perhaps not surprising, that such family support is associated with positive psychological outcomes amongst those who are trans* (Bockting et al., 2016; Grant et al., 2011). In the one published study of parent–child relationships and child development in 32 trans* parent families, all of which were formed using donor sperm, children were found to be well adjusted (Chiland, Cloet, Golse, Guinot, & Wolf, 2013). However, little is yet known about how children navigate parental gender identity, and what their parent being trans* might mean for them. Based on the reports of therapists and parents, it seems that children's age at the time of their parent's transition may be significant for their understanding and subsequent adjustment, with younger children thought to be more accepting of parental gender transition than are older children (Pyne, 2012; White & Ettner, 2004, 2007). Acceptance of a parent's gender identity may be gradual, possibly non-linear (Haines et al., 2014), and/or something that ultimately increases with time (Veldorale-Griffin, 2014).

Social experiences have also been shown to be important to children's perspectives in trans* parent families. Parents report being concerned about children's experiences of bullying (Haines

et al., 2014), their public safety (Petit et al., 2017), and the consequences of public perceptions of their gender identity in general (Chiland et al., 2013). As teenagers, children may express concerns about family visibility, and in particular, being seen in public with their trans* parent (Church et al., 2014; Dierckx et al., 2017). One consequence of such concerns is that different names and pronouns may be used for parents within and outside of the home environment (Norwood, 2012, 2013a, 2013b; Petit et al., 2017; Pyne, 2012). In Dierckx et al.'s (2017) study, several participants (of a total of thirteen children, aged 9–26 years) expressed a fear of social stigmatization. Although none of the participants in this study described experiences of bullying, being stared at by strangers and experiencing inappropriate questioning by peers were common.

The possibility that children may be socially ostracized as a result of their parent's gender identity was in fact recently determined to be of such grave possibility by the UK High Court that contact between a trans* parent and her children was severely restricted (J v B and The Children, 2017). Although such judgments are not uncommon (Cooper, 2013), empirical evidence relating to the experiences of children and adolescents in trans* parent families is scarce. Indeed, in a review of 41 studies published on the topic in 2016, no data had been collected from children under the age of 18 (Dierckx, Motmans, Mortelmans, & Guy, 2016), although studies have since investigated the perspectives of younger, teenage and adult children as a collective (Dierckx et al., 2017; Dierckx & Platero, 2018). Given the increasingly vociferous interest in parenting amongst trans* people (see, for instance, responses to the Women and Equalities Committee Review [WECR], 2016), and anticipated technological (Alghrani, 2018) and legal changes (resulting from the 2018 consultation on the UK Gender Recognition Act), it is likely that the number of children raised by a trans* parent in the UK will significantly increase in years to come.[2] The study reported in this article is the only known investigation to have exclusively researched the perspectives of minors.

Theoretical frameworks

The existing literature on trans* parent families has been largely informed by theories from clinical practice such as ambiguous loss (e.g., Norwood, 2012) and family stress (e.g., Veldorale-Griffin & Darling, 2016). These theories each start from the assumption that parental gender transition can have an adverse effect on family functioning and relationship quality (Norwood, 2012; Veldorale-Griffin, 2014; Veldorale-Griffin & Anderson Darling, 2016). The reliance on these frameworks has in turn led to a more recent focus on the risk *and* resilience factors that contribute to how family members experience a relative's gender transition, along with a critique of initial approaches (Dierckx et al., 2017; McGuire et al., 2016).

The study reported in this article aimed to understand how children and adolescents with a trans* parent experience family life and relationships in the everyday, and how they perceive their experiences. Throughout, we draw upon theories of symbolic interactionism, which hold that it is through social interaction that individuals come to experience themselves and make meaning of their identities (e.g., Mead, 1934). In so doing, the present study builds upon the previous contributions of Norwood (2012, 2013a, 2013b) and Simpson (2018), who have each highlighted the significance of the social context of family life in understanding the experiences of those with a trans* family member.

Theories of symbolic interaction are well known for underlying the intellectual tradition of theorizing gender as something that it is 'done', rather than something that one 'has' (West & Zimmerman, 1987). The framework is perhaps less renowned, though no less significant, for its role in research on the responses to gender transition amongst partners, family members, and friends (Whitley, 2013). Whitley's (2013) research focused on the role of reflected appraisals (relatives' perceptions of social perceptions) and stigma (relatives' experiences of negative social perceptions) amongst those with close family members and friends who are trans*. Their study found that relatives in socially supportive

environments were more able to reconfigure their ideas about gender, and so too their relationships with their trans* family member, than were those who received little social support.

In the present study, we were interested not only in how children's relationships with their trans* parent related to their parent's gender identity, but also in how far parental gender identity had an impact upon children's views and experiences of family life more generally. In order to understand these experiences in context, we draw upon Finch's (2007) concept of 'family display', and Galvin's (2006) notion of 'discourse dependence'. In keeping with symbolic interactionism, these theories emphasize the identity work that is done around the family unit by its members, often as a collective. In particular, these approaches hold that the family is both defined and maintained by communicative practices that are particularly pertinent to families that differ from the 'traditional' model (Schneider, 1968). This emphasis on the role of symbolic communication is warranted by empirical findings on the negotiation of parental designations (Petit et al., 2017) and the relevance of family visibility (Dierckx et al., 2017) to trans* parent families.

According to Finch (2007, p. 67), family display is "*the process by which individuals, and groups of individuals, convey to each other and to relevant others that certain of their actions do constitute 'doing family things' and thereby confirm that these relationships are 'family' relationships.*" Extending Morgan's (1996) concept of 'doing family', the notion of family display emphasizes that actions take place in a social context that appraises them; it is not enough to say that families are 'done', but that this 'doing' is acknowledged by others to mean 'family-like'. Finch's (2007) examples of family display are both direct (e.g., verbal communication) and indirect (e.g., communication through signs, such as family photographs displayed within the home), and take place amongst members, and with relevant audiences. Similarly, Galvin's (2006, p. 4) notion of discourse dependence expresses the external processes of labeling, explaining, legitimizing and defending, and internal processes of naming, narrating, discussing and ritualizing, the family, which "*surface as members face outsiders' challenges regarding the veracity of their claims of relatedness or as members experience a need to revisit their familial identity.*" According to Galvin (2006, p. 3), such discursive practices are recurrent, may take place between family members themselves and/or in the broader social context, may include both direct and indirect communication, and are a means by which "*less traditionally formed families*" in particular manage and maintain their familial identity. Existing research makes clear that relatives' appraisals of a family member's gender identity are embedded within a social context that 'genders' the family system and its relationships, such that "*relationship categories are strictly associated with one sex or another, making it difficult to imagine a man being called 'aunt' or a woman being referred to as 'father'*" (Norwood, 2012, p. 78). As such, one of the key areas of interest in this study was how far the concepts of display and discourse dependence are salient for understanding how children and adolescents with a trans* parent make meaning of, and experience, family life and relationships.

Research aims

The aims of this research were therefore threefold: (i) to address a significant gap in the literature, by directly investigating the views of children and adolescents within trans* parent families; (ii) to understand how children and adolescents with a trans* parent experience family life and relationships in the everyday, and how they perceive their experiences; (iii) to contribute to the emerging empirical evidence of the significance of the social context of family life in understanding the experiences of those with a trans* family member, by using the theoretical lens of symbolic interactionism.

Materials and methods

Recruitment and sampling

Thirty-three children and adolescents aged between 4 and 18 years, of whom 23 were siblings, were recruited to the study between February 2017 and December 2018 on the basis that their parent(s) had taken part in an interview for a broader project investigating psychological adjustment, the parenting quality, and parent–child relationships in trans* parent families (Imrie, Zadeh, Wylie & Golombok, under review). Parents were recruited through social media. Two not-for-profit organizations (Stonewall and Gendered Intelligence) posted an advert on their Twitter and Facebook pages and disseminated the advert through their links with other organizations working with trans* adults. Online recruitment was also carried out through Scottish Trans Alliance and GIRES. Fifty-four people contacted the researchers, of whom 4 were ineligible, and 33 participated in the study.

Participants (children and adolescents aged 4–18 whose parent(s) had (i) been interviewed, and (ii) agreed for their children to be asked to participate) were asked if they would like to take part in a study about their families and the relationships within them.

Of those who agreed to take part, 4 (12%) were removed from the dataset as they (i) were not asked or did not wish to answer any of the questions relating to having a trans* parent (N = 3), or (ii) did not consent to have the interview audio-recorded (N = 1), such that drawing conclusions about their experiences in line with the aims of the study was not possible.

The final sample reported in this article comprises 29 children and adolescents aged 5–18 (mean = 12, S.D. = 3.41) from 19 families. All participants had at least one parent who identified as trans*. In the case of 5 participants (from two families), more than one resident parent identified as trans*; for the purposes of this article, in these cases we report sociodemographic details of the main caregiver. Parents' ages ranged from 36 to 59 years (mean = 45.89, S.D. = 5.81). Further demographic details of participants and their families are reported in Table 1.

The parents of the majority of participants (27, 93%) had communicated their trans* identity during parenthood, and the parents of two participants (7%) had communicated their trans* identity before having children. For all participants, the length of time between parent-child communication about parental gender identity and the interview varied from between 7 months and 10 years. In several cases, it was difficult to identify from participants' responses the timing of transition. Several participants, for example, spoke about their parent's transition as a gradual process, by which some aspects, such as wearing gender-congruent clothing, were apparent prior to any verbal communication they had had about their parent's gender identity.

The study received ethical approval from the [University of Cambridge Psychology Research] Ethics Committee.

Data collection

All participants took part in a semi-structured interview with questions designed to understand their perspectives on family life and family relationships in relation to their parent's gender identity. Topic areas included relationships with each parent, relationships with siblings, relationships with peers and with other people, such as teachers and wider family members, and relevant relationships between other people (for example, their parents' relationship). A section of the interview focused explicitly on the experience of having a trans* parent, and gauged participants' meaning-making around trans*, both in terms of how they defined and understood the concept, and what this meant for them in the context of their families. Specifically, participants were asked about their experience of their parent's transition, their experience of having a trans* parent now, and to describe anything particularly easy or challenging for them in relation to this. Different interview schedules were used with participants of different ages, with questions phrased and presented in an age-appropriate way for children aged 4–7 years, 8–12 years, and adolescents,

Table 1. Sociodemographic details of participants and their families.

	N
Age	
5–6	2
7–8	3
9–10	4
11–12	5
13–14	9
15–16	3
17–18	3
Gender	
Female	13
Male	13
Genderqueer	1
Gender fluid/transgender	1
Non-binary	1
Parenting arrangement	
Child living with both legal parents	16
Shared parenting: shared equally between two households	1
Shared parenting: child mainly living with trans* parent	9
Shared parenting: child mainly living with other parent	3
Family composition	
One child	1
Two children	10
Three or more	8
Parent gender	
Female	5
Trans female or trans woman	4
Agender	1
Female (present as androgynous)	1
Genderfluid	1
Genderqueer	1
Male with a trans history	1
Nonbinary	1
Nonbinary trans	1
Transexual	1
trans man	1
Transwoman/nonbinary	1
Parent ethnicity	
White English/Scottish/Northern Irish/British	16
White Irish	1
Any other white background	2
Parent employment*	
Professional	3
Managerial/technical	13
Skilled non-manual	2

*Missing data: N = 1.

respectively. The various interview schedules were discussed at length with community contacts Jay Stewart, Gendered Intelligence, and Bex Stinson, Stonewall, to ensure that the questions asked were appropriate, particularly in terms of phraseology. Interview questions were also phrased in such a way that reflected the pronouns and names participants used for their trans* parent. Children and adolescents aged 8+ were also administered the Friends and Family Interview (Steele & Steele, 2005), a measure designed to ascertain the security of children's attachments to their caregivers. For the purposes of this article, responses to this interview were coded qualitatively rather than according to the clinical coding manual. All interviews were transcribed and anonymized, with names and places replaced with pseudonyms.

Data analysis

Data were analyzed using a theoretically-informed approach to thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). All transcripts were read and re-read for familiarization before beginning the

process of coding. This process was both deductive and inductive, with transcripts coded for their content, as well as codes being informed by the previous literature on this topic. Extracts were sometimes coded more than once for multiple meanings. The first stage of analysis resulted in a total of 63 codes. All coded extracts were then read for a third time, and codes were collapsed to produce 6 subthemes: parent–child relationships; relationships between parents, and in the wider family system; parental roles; children's responsibilities; disruptions to family display; and revising representations. Relevant analytic concepts from the literature (e.g., ambiguous loss, risks/resilience, family display, and discourse dependence) were reviewed and used in the process of theme refinement. The final thematic map was subject to discussion between colleagues who were responsible for collecting the majority of data for this study (S.I. and S.Z.). A deviant case analysis was conducted, which resulted in cases that deviated from the overall thematic structure being retained (Shenton, 2004). Further analyses that attended to variations within the sample, such as parenting arrangements, family composition, parent gender and parent sociodemographic details (see Table 1) were then conducted. Where relevant, the deviant cases, as well as patterns relating to variations within the sample, are identified in the discussion of themes that follows.

Results

Four themes, capturing participants' views and experiences relating to family life with a trans* parent, were identified. The first two themes, (i) Relational continuities, and (ii) Losses, more and less ambiguous, reflect participants' narratives about family relationships. The other two themes, (iii) Becoming responsible, and (iv) Negotiating family display, signify participants' experiences both within and outside of the home environment. The latter themes capture participants' reflections on their family-related actions as well as their perceptions.

Relational continuities

The first theme, 'relational continuities', reflects the finding that most participants described their parent's gender identity as something that had impacted neither upon their family nor upon the parent–child relationship. This theme relates to Norwood's (2013a) finding that some relatives conceptualize their family member's transition as a 'revision' (that is, not a change of the person, but a revision of their gender identity).

Indeed, the vast majority of participants described their parent's gender identity as having had no impact on their family, using phrases such as *"nothing's really changed, it's just been the same"* (13-year-old) and *"it doesn't bother me, it's not a problem"* (12-year-old). In some cases, participants stressed that their parent being trans* was not really 'about them' and as such was not of relevance or interest, suggesting that they were able to conceptualize their parent's gender identity as separate to their own, and indeed their familial, identities. For example, one 14-year-old participant said, *"it's not like I'm trans or anything, it doesn't really matter to me that much"*, and an 18-year-old participant stated, *"I was almost uninterested because … it didn't affect me at all really"*.

Feelings of indifference also featured in participants' descriptions of their relationships with their trans* parent, which were described as largely unchanged by parental gender identity. For example, one 15-year-old participant said, *"it sort of didn't make any massive difference to us, like he was the same person, just … with different body parts and sounded a bit different"*, again as per Norwood's (2013a) notion of transition as a 'revision'. The view of transition as having had no impact on parent–child relationships was also articulated by participants in terms that directly contrast to the previous literature on gender transition as an ambiguous loss (Norwood, 2012). For instance, one 14-year-old, outlining what he would want other children whose parents were

transitioning to know, stated: *"I would just say like there isn't much change to any relationship or anything."* Similar sentiments were expressed by a 17-year-old, who said, *"you haven't lost a parent"*, and a 14-year-old, who remarked, *"they're still your parent, it's not going to change how they care about you"*. Such responses would seem to suggest that transition, as children and adolescents understand it in the context of family relationships, is not generally experienced as a loss or indeed a stressor.

It was also common for participants who described their relationship to their parent as unchanged to explain that their parent's gender identity was not something that they often thought or talked about in everyday life. In contrast to Galvin's (2006) suggestion that discussion amongst family members may be a feature of discourse dependence within nonconventional families, one 8-year-old stated: *"I haven't talked about that memory for ages, because it's kind of a memory."* Other participants echoed this experience, with a 13-year-old explaining, *"it's not really a topic, it's just there"*, and a 10-year-old describing, *"it's just a normal thing now."* It was more common for participants to describe having had conversations with their parent about appropriate parental designations: *"I just remember a conversation about names. About what her name is going to be"* (17-year-old). However, not all of the children and adolescents interviewed had changed the name they used for their parent. Moreover, it was uncommon for participants to describe parental gender identity as inciting a shift in family roles – from father to mother, or vice versa. In fact, some of the children and adolescents in this study actively resisted using the gender-congruent family role to refer to their trans* parent, a finding that appears to reinforce the idea that relational continuities, rather than ruptures, were generally characteristic of participants' perspectives.

A minority of participants said that their relationship with their trans* parent had improved as a result of transition. The majority of these answers were given in response to one of two questions of the Friends and Family Interview (Steele & Steele, 2005) about why caregivers are the way that they are, and how children perceive their relationships with them to have changed over time. In the words of one participant, aged 5, transition had meant that her father was *"being much more kinder"*. Similarly, a 9-year-old described: *"When she was a boy she was really unhappy … since she's transitioned she's come home from work, hugged us, been really happy … and it's changed a lot since she's transitioned."*

Losses, more and less ambiguous

A minority of participants described temporary feelings of ambiguous loss, particularly when first told about their parent's gender identity. These participants were exclusively those who had in some way witnessed their parent's transition. As a 12-year-old participant said, *"I was quite sad at first because I felt like they're a different person, but then I'm like actually no, they're the same person."* For one participant, aged 9, parental gender transition was accompanied by feelings of loss that, at the time of interview, were not entirely reconciled. Although also having described that her father was much happier as a result of transition, when reflecting on her initial response, this participant said, *"when she transitioned I felt like there was a hole in my heart, like because like I missed a dad … sometimes I do not actually remember what he looked, she looked like."* This description clearly highlights the sense in which transition, at least for some children and adolescents, may be initially experienced within the family system as a 'replacement' (Norwood, 2013a) of one person with another. However, it is also worth highlighting that the few narratives featuring loss were more likely to describe the loss of a parent in a particular role (e.g., a father or mother) than the loss of the parent-child relationship: *"When I was younger, thinking about going through the fact that my mam … that my dad is now becoming a mam and … and it was very hard and I couldn't stop thinking about it"* (9-year-old).

Other participants were less likely to describe the ambiguous loss of a parent than they were to articulate ambiguity around their parent's gender identity. For example, one 14-year-old asked, *"is it finished?…Is there any more to it?"*, and a 9-year-old said, *"I'm also quite curious about the outcome when this whole thing is done…when they're a woman"*. Such findings seem to suggest that children's experiences of ambiguity may center upon their parent's gender expression, rather than their parent's role. Given that several participants described an initial lack of awareness of trans* identities, suggesting for example that *"I'd never really heard of transgender before"* (14-year-old) and *"I didn't think people could be a gender and then turn into another gender"* (7-year-old), this finding is perhaps not especially surprising.

Several participants also described losses that were unambiguous, insofar as it was not uncommon for participants to describe changing dynamics in the wider family system. Some participants explained, for example, that although they remained in contact with aunts, uncles, or grandparents, these family members were no longer in contact with their trans* parent: *"When ma told my grandad, well…he didn't take it very well and he doesn't talk to Ma, only us"* (10-year-old). A minority of participants explained that their own relationships with wider family members had been intentionally severed as a result of their parent's gender identity: *"People on my mum's side of the family really struggle with it…her parents and brothers and basically everyone over there cut us off"* (17-year-old). In so doing, participants highlighted that these losses, although not always personal to them, were a feature of wider family dynamics, and were consequently negatively experienced.

Becoming responsible

Although most of the participants in this study suggested that their parent's gender identity had not been especially impactful upon their relationship with them, it was also common for participants to describe ways in which their parent being trans* required them to 'become responsible'. Firstly, with regards to their parent's pronouns, participants commonly expressed concerns about *"using the wrong terms"* (13-year-old), being *"unsure what pronouns to use"* (14-year-old), and having to *"force myself to remember it"* (14-year-old). These experiences were shared by the majority of participants with parents who had first communicated their trans* identity after having had children. For some participants, these concerns were ongoing, whereas for others, they had diminished over time. One 18-year-old said, *"I think I'm still adjusting to it because I still forget to use the her pronoun and talk about her…I have to make a special effort to use 'her'…but then I go back to he because I've forgotten"*, while a 13-year-old stated: *"Sometimes when I was referring to my dad I would accidentally say he instead of she…but that went away quite quickly."* A third example was given by a 17-year-old: *"Obviously there were a few name change issues at first [laughs]. Like for instance if I was scared, I obviously like screamed for my dad [laughs] and then it wouldn't be my dad…it was just a bit awkward because…I called the wrong name, but I think it happens to everyone."*

Some participants described 'becoming responsible' for educating other people on the topic of gender identity, and for challenging cisnormative representations of family life amongst their peer groups, and at school. For some participants, these were major events, such as was the case for a 9-year-old, who explained: *"This one time [at school] they was talking about different genders and…I put my hand up…and then I said 'I don't actually have a dad cos my dad's a transsexual', and I got the School Award for it."* (9-year-old). For other participants, educating other people was routine, as in correcting peers' use of the wrong pronouns when talking about their parent: *"When I'm talking about my dad I always say like she and stuff, and they're like 'don't you mean he?' I'm like 'no, she', and it's kind of funny because they get really confused, and then I explain it to them"* (12-year-old). Other participants still were indignant about addressing negative perceptions of their parent: *"Then people who aren't [supportive]…I give them a very long lecture about*

it … it's just a bit like … accept people for what they are, if you were this, would you like it if people did this?" (15-year-old). However, while some participants described these social situations with relative ease, others were less positive about their new responsibilities. One 14-year-old participant said, *"explaining it over and over kind of gets tiring for me"*, while another participant, also aged 14, stated, *"they'll say 'he' and I go, that's 'she' now … I'd like people to remember that"*.

A minority of participants also described that their initial explanations of their parent's gender identity to their peers had been met with disbelief, with one 7-year-old participant describing how a friend, *"didn't think it was a thing … she said I don't believe you"*. The experiences described by these participants share similarities with the children and young people in same-sex parent families interviewed in Guasp's (2010) research, who too found themselves responsible for educating others about family diversity. Such findings suggest that amongst some members of trans* parent families, externally legitimizing or defending the family may be an unwelcome form of discourse dependence (Galvin, 2006), 'incidental activism' (Carroll, 2018), or indeed 'emotional labor' (Hochschild, 1983).

A third sense in which participants described 'becoming responsible' related to changes to their parents' relationship. A minority of participants explained that they had become a source of support to their gender conforming parent, regardless of whether or not their parents remained in a relationship at the time of transition. Reflecting on her experiences, one 14-year-old with separated parents stated, *"I was like trying to help my mum through it as well because she'd just found out"*. Another participant, whose parents were still together, explained: *"She was really distressed with him being transgender and she's spent a lot of time in her room crying ….I spend more time with her like … saying are you alright and cuddling her"* (13-year-old). A third participant, aged 14, explained that there had been changes to the relationship between his parents over time: *"My mum, I think I remember she was surprised … and not sure if this is what she wanted, but in the end she doesn't mind"*, while a fourth described ongoing changes within the family system. This participant, aged 18, explained that there were differential levels of support for his father's gender identity within the family, which had resulted in changes to the nature of family alliances:

> *"I don't know how much my dad has told my mum about his transgenderness or his plans for that, he's told me sort of up to what he's decided, but he's got decisions to make that he hasn't decided on yet, so I don't know how my mum will react to these decisions … He tells me he's afraid to tell her what he's planning because he's afraid of the way she'll react and what she might do."*

Another participant, aged 13, explained that his family situation was *"stressful"* because his parents, who remained together, had been arguing a great deal. Such experiences bring to mind the findings of previous research on the role played by a second parent in children's appraisals of transition (Freedman et al., 2002; Pyne, 2012; Haines et al., 2014). However, it is worth here highlighting the fact that these children were each positive about their parent's gender identity, and were likely to express support irrespective of their second parent's feelings, and in spite of the 'emotion work' (Hochschild, 1979) involved in 'becoming responsible'. For instance, one 13-year-old said, *"I was just saying in my head that it's completely fine how he thinks, it's his life. My mum doesn't rule over it"*.

Negotiating family display

Most participants relayed specific social experiences in which the fact of having a trans* parent had impacted upon their family identity and/or its display. This finding is perhaps unsurprising, given that the children and adolescents in this study are growing up in a social context in which normative ideas about parenting and gender intersect (Hines, 2006; Simpson, 2018). Indeed, the vast majority of participants described either feeling as though their parent's gender identity may disrupt others' perceptions of their family as legitimate, or experiences in which the legitimacy of their family, and specifically its display, had been explicitly called into question. These two aspects of disruption seem to relate to Whitley's (2013) emphasis on stigma as both experienced and anticipated by the partners, family

members, and friends of individuals who are trans*. Indeed, it was not uncommon for children and adolescents to describe negative social interactions and experiences relating to their parent's gender identity. A 13-year-old explained: *"People who know that my dad is trans think it's weird and one boy threatened to call Social Services as joke, and that's not really a joke to me"*, while a 17-year-old described: *"These boys in the year above kept like coming up to me and asking me questions, being like, 'Oh, is your dad wearing a dress?', like cornering me and stuff"*. Such findings contrast with those of Dierckx et al. (2017), amongst whose sample of young people no examples of bullying were found. For the participants in the present study, negative social experiences and indeed instances of bullying were most often enacted by children or adolescents outside of their friendship group, and often at school. Participants mostly described that instances of bullying were promptly addressed by school teachers, and had not recurred. It is also noteworthy that many of the participants described that disruptions to family display (Finch, 2007) were connected to other children perceiving a disruption between the assumed gender of a parent and their gender presentation, with a specific focus on style of dress. In a minority of cases, participants explained that others had asked *"uncomfortable"* (15-year-old), *"offensive"* (15-year-old) or *"creepy"* (14-year-old) questions about their parent's gender identity.

However, despite these negative experiences with peers and others at school, the majority of children and adolescents who had told their friends about their parent's gender identity were responded to either neutrally or positively. It is also noteworthy that a number of participants mentioned having friends who identified as trans*, as well as a handful of participants themselves self-identifying in this way.

With regards to their expectations of social responses, several participants explained that they had felt anxious about their parent's gender identity and how others would perceive this, thereby reaffirming Whitley's (2013) distinction between experienced and anticipated stigma. Echoing previous findings of young people's hesitation to be seen in public with their trans* parent (Church et al., 2014; Dierckx et al., 2017), some participants described concerns that their trans* parent might be negatively appraised, and further, that their family display (Finch, 2007) might be called into question:

> *"When we're at home together it's very comfortable… I think out in public it's a bit different because he's transgender, I always kind of think about what other people are thinking, I always worry about whether we'll run into anyone who's mean or something, and I always worry about him experiencing any hate."* (14-year-old)

In fact, the only child in the study to indicate a preference for his parent not to have transitioned explained his reasoning in relation to anticipated transphobia:

> *"I'm being absolutely honest here, I'd make* [parent] *a man again.* [Interviewer probes why]. *I don't know, just it feels a bit weird, and maybe one day people will look and say, 'Oh, is that a woman married to another woman?', so like that. I get a bit worried for* [parent] *because I often talk to them in the supermarkets and they talk back, so people might get worried, people might stop and stare because it's like a woman speaking with a man's voice."* (9-year-old)

The concern shared by the 9-year-old above, that his parents would be misinterpreted as being part of a same-sex couple, also featured in other participants' accounts. It was suggested by one 17-year-old, for example, that although *"people don't really realize that transition has happened… obviously having two mums can be quite a stand out thing"*, while another 12-year-old participant explained, *"it's more having two mums that is affecting me… but not so much* [parent] *being trans because actually that's not really obvious"*. Such findings highlight the significance of the visibility of difference to the experiences of many of the children and adolescents in this study, several of whom described having to negotiate social situations in order to minimize the possibility of experiencing transphobia. For some participants, this meant varying parental designations according to context: *"Say if we're like in the toilets, because she goes to the girl toilets, I don't call her dad then because like people would think it was really weird"* (14-year-old). For other participants, this meant choosing not to tell people about their parent's gender identity: *"I

never talk about it, cos it's a secret. [Interviewer probes why]. *Cos I don't want everybody to know so so so they can tell everybody*" (5-year-old).

However, although most participants described negotiating their family display in ways that would minimize the social visibility of their family, a minority of participants described such visible difference as something to which they were indifferent: "*He's been wearing skirts … as long as I can remember. To me it's not strange, it's perfectly normal and to somebody else maybe having a dad who wears skirts and likes pink and stuff it would be weird, but to me it's perfectly normal*" (12-year-old). In so doing, these participants articulated an explicit awareness of the differences between their own appraisals of family life and the appraisals that others may make: "*Queer families aren't that unusual from any other family really apart from the way that we get treated there's not really a big difference*" (12-year-old). It is noteworthy that these participants were no less likely to have had negative social experiences related to their parents' gender identity than were those who described carefully negotiating their family display according to context.

Discussion

The findings of this study present a rich – and mixed – picture of the views and experiences of children and adolescents with a trans* parent. In general, it seems that having a parent who is trans* has little or no impact on how children themselves feel about, and experience, parent–child relationships. In terms of relationships within the family system, however, some children and adolescents were found to have witnessed relational ruptures. Crucially, unlike the findings of previous research on the impact of parental conflict on children's thoughts and feelings about transition (Freedman et al., 2002; Haines et al., 2014; Pyne, 2012), such ruptures do not seem to negatively impact upon children and adolescents' responses to their parent's gender identity, or their own relationships with them. Far beyond the first study of the impact of 'transsexual parenting' on children's gender development (Green, 1978), the findings of this study, based on children and adolescents' experiences *as they themselves have shared them*, would therefore seem to suggest that having a trans* parent does not lead to adverse outcomes in terms of children's perceptions of the quality of their relationships with their parents, even when relationships between other family members are affected as a result. These findings are corroborated by parents' and children's reports on robust, quantitative measures of parent–child relationship quality, reported in Imrie et al. (under review), as well as by the findings of another study, based in France, on the same topic (Chiland et al., 2013).

In contrast to existing research on the ways in which family members may experience a relative's gender transition as in some sense related to loss (Norwood, 2013a), this study's findings make clear that children and adolescents do not generally view a parent's transition in this way. For a minority of the children in this study, however, the experience of transition was found to be accompanied by feelings that a parent had been 'replaced' (Norwood, 2013a), and a minority of children expressed ongoing challenges in relation to understanding their parent's gender identity. While it may seem appropriate to understand these children's responses in relation to the ambiguous loss framework (Norwood, 2012), an alternative way of interpreting their experiences is as a consequence of children framing the implications of their parent being trans* in terms of family roles, rather than (or as well as) family relationships. For children and adolescents primarily able to view their parent's gender identity in terms of its impact on the parent-child relationship, perceptions of loss (that is, of a parent) appear to be less common.

Although positive in many respects, it is worth making clear that the findings of this study do not indicate that having a trans* parent has little or no impact on children and adolescents. In fact, as in research on children and adolescents in same-sex parent families (Guasp, 2010), our findings highlight the important, and sometimes laborious, work that children and adolescents with trans* parents undertake in navigating this experience, both within and outside of the home

environment. Within the context of the home, the participants in this study described the responsibilities they felt with regards to using the correct pronouns for their parent. A minority of participants also described feeling responsible for the management of their second parent's feelings about transition. Outside of the home, findings illustrate children and adolescents' management of familial identities through labeling, explaining and sometimes defending their parent's position within the family. Given that previous research has highlighted feelings of a lack of visibility amongst trans* parents (Faccio, Bordin & Cipoletta, 2013; Hines, 2006), such findings are perhaps not surprising, but certainly give pause for thought. Indeed, the findings of this study clearly raise questions about the extent to which children and adolescents should be responsible for educating their peers and other social contacts about what it means to be trans*.

On this point, it is also worth highlighting the diversity of participants' approaches to family identity management, and in the extent to which participants readily shared information about their parent's gender identity with other people. Although most of the participants had experienced others' lack of understanding at best, and transphobia at worst, it is clear that some of the children and adolescents were more comfortable with discussing their parent's gender identity, and indeed in countering negative responses, than were others. Understanding why this is the case is complex, and may relate to children and adolescents' own characteristics, or the ways in which parental gender identity is thought of, and talked about, within their families. Importantly, however, those participants who described greater openness about their parent's gender identity were no less likely to have had negative social experiences related to their parents' gender identity than were those who described more frequent negotiations of family display. In this respect our findings overall echo those of previous research, which has identified the tenacity of normative representations of gender and family life (Hines, 2006; Norwood, 2012; Simpson, 2018).

However, the findings of this study also substantially differ from previous research that has interviewed children and young people in trans* parent families (Dierckx et al., 2017) in terms of children and adolescents' experiences of transphobic bullying, which we found to feature in several participants' accounts. The reason for this difference is not entirely clear, but when viewed alongside UK national statistics about the marked increase in transphobic hate crimes in recent years (Bachmann & Gooch, 2017), it is especially noteworthy. In other UK-based research on the experiences of trans* young people at school, similar accounts of bullying and/or misunderstanding amongst peers were found (Bradlow, Bartram, Guasp, & Jadva, 2017), suggesting a need to address the educational contexts in which children and adolescents who are themselves trans*, or have a trans* parent, are situated.

In terms of its theoretical contributions, this study presents two new lenses for researchers interested in the intersection of gender and parenting identities, and identifies how this intersection specifically relates to the experience and enactment of family life by children and adolescents in trans* parent families. In focusing on communicative practices within and about the family, the study highlights the relevance of Finch's (2007) concept of 'family display' to understanding both how children negotiate aspects of parental gender identity (e.g. in terms of parental designations) and how they navigate the social world with a trans* parent (e.g., in terms of situated pronoun use). The findings therefore reaffirm the value of this theoretical framework to understanding non-normative family experiences, and in particular, in understanding the role that naming, as a form of display, may play in communicating familial legitimacy (Dempsey & Lindsay, 2018).

Moreover, the findings seem to suggest that there is room for more theoretical work on perceived disruptions to display, particularly in terms of how these perceptions are experienced by members of the families that disrupt normative expectations of family life. As such, researchers may wish to consider how the notions of 'display' and 'discourse dependence' together align to produce a coherent theoretical framework with which to understand non-normative family experiences. Indeed, like previous research on same-sex parent families (Breshears, 2011), which

highlighted parents' and children's experiences of communicative challenges to family legitimacy from others, the findings of this study make clear the significance of Galvin's (2006) notion of 'discourse dependence' to children and adolescents in trans* parent families, who may be prompted to explain or legitimize their families to others. At the same time, it is clear that an analysis of communicative practices alone does not account for the ways in which relatedness may be experienced within trans* parent families (that is, as mostly unaffected by transition). In fact, the findings seem to suggest that despite cisnormative representations, children and adolescents are generally able to successfully integrate parental gender identity into their views and experiences of family life, and the fact of their parent being trans* is not something that families often discuss. In this respect, it is especially noteworthy that the findings – based on children and adolescents' own reports – differ substantially from those identified previously in research that has relied upon other people's accounts of children's responses (Freedman et al., 2002; White & Ettner, 2004, 2007). It is worth emphasizing that such previous studies, which identified the negative nature of children's experiences of the parent-child relationship and/or experiences of family conflict in trans* parent families, were based upon samples who were in contact with clinical services. The present study therefore serves as a valuable reminder of the fact that children and adolescents should be considered key participants in family research (Mason & Tipper, 2014), and that researchers' sampling decisions may strongly influence the findings that their work generates.

On this point, it is worth bearing in mind that the research on which this article is based was conducted with children and adolescents whose parents self-selected to take part in a broader study on family functioning. It may be the case that those parents whose families are experiencing greater difficulties were unable or unwilling to participate. However, it is also worth noting that the sample reflects a diverse set of family arrangements (with parents who are together, separated, or repartnered) that might not be expected were participants self-selecting on the basis of familial harmony or an absence of difficulties. Given the size of the sample, conclusions about any associations (or lack thereof) between children's sociodemographic characteristics, the characteristics of their families, and the themes identified should be drawn cautiously. As the first of its kind to focus exclusively on what family life is like for minors with a trans* parent, this study nevertheless clearly offers new insights into children and adolescents' experiences of trans* parent family life in social context.

Implications

The findings of this study are relevant to both researchers and practitioners working in this area, as well as for families in which there are trans* parents, and for those who come into contact with them. For parents and practitioners, findings suggest that encouraging the framing of trans* parenthood in the context of existing and continuing positive parent–child relationships may be helpful (see also McGuire et al., 2016), and that being mindful of how others' appraisals of transition may impact upon children's experiences of family life is important. For educators of children and adolescents with trans* parents, findings imply that teaching about family diversity may be beneficial, and that support for, and affirmation of, the children and adolescents who choose to discuss their parent's gender identity at school is crucial. Finally, for those responsible for making decisions about custody and contact between trans* parents and their children, the empirical evidence detailed in this article – that children and adolescents themselves generally describe their relationships with their trans* parent positively – will no doubt be instructive.

Notes

1. In defining these terms in this way, we wish to avoid reproducing transnormativity, that is, beliefs that "*structure transgender experience, identification, and narratives into a hierarchy of legitimacy that is*

dependent upon a binary medical model" (Johnson, 2016, p. 466). We are grateful to Susie Bower-Brown for drawing our attention to this concept.

2. The 2018 public consultation about the Gender Recognition Act (2004), the UK legislation through which trans individuals can acquire legal recognition of their gender identity, brought forth the question of whether self-identification may be sufficient in law (see Government Equalities Office [GEO], 2018b). As it stands, many trans* people in the UK, parents and non-parents alike, experience legal barriers to being recognized as their gender (see responses to the WECR, 2016).

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