

Parenting the Phoenix
Transformative learning experiences of parents of transgender and non-binary children
Élever un phénix
Expériences d'apprentissage transformateur de personnes parentes d'enfants transgenres et non binaires

Elizabeth A. McNeilly

Volume 35, Number 2, December 2023

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1109301ar>
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.56105/cjsae.v35i02.5658>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Canadian Association for the Study of Adult Education / L'Association canadienne pour l'étude de l'éducation des adultes

ISSN

0835-4944 (print)
1925-993X (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

McNeilly, E. (2023). Parenting the Phoenix: Transformative learning experiences of parents of transgender and non-binary children. *The Canadian Journal for the Study of Adult Education / La revue canadienne pour l'étude de l'éducation des adultes*, 35(2), 1–18. <https://doi.org/10.56105/cjsae.v35i02.5658>

Article abstract

For many parents of transgender or non-binary children the experience is transformative learning (Mezirow, 1978). This life history study of 17 parents of children aged 6 to 29 comprised of 33 interviews, 10 participant journals, and an autoethnography. Findings from the data indicated parental learning was a holistic experience (Illeris, 2003), a balance of emotion, cognition, and sociality. When one domain of learning was overstimulated, learning could be disrupted. Parents restructured their conceptions of gender, working through understandings of gender from their past and new ideas of the present. Learning also occurred in two phases, a private phase of cognitive reframing and then a more public phase as parents learned to advocate for their child. Most parents were anchored by value of authenticity, and some mothers revisited the notion of “What makes a woman?” For some, working through discomfort was one part of the learning process.

Volume 35 Issue 2

cjsae

the canadian journal for the study of adult education

la revue canadienne pour l'étude de l'éducation des adultes

rceéa

PARENTING THE PHOENIX: TRANSFORMATIVE
LEARNING EXPERIENCES OF PARENTS OF
TRANSGENDER AND NON-BINARY CHILDREN

Elizabeth A. McNeilly

*The Canadian Journal for the Study of Adult Education/
La revue canadienne pour l'étude de l'éducation des adultes*
Editors-in-Chief: J. Adam Perry and Robin Neustaeter
French Language Editor: Jean-Pierre Mercier
www.cjsae-rceea.ca

35,2 December/décembre 2023, 1–18
ISSN1925-993X (online)

© Canadian Association for the Study of Adult Education/
L'Association canadienne pour l'étude de l'éducation des adultes
www.casae-aceea.ca

PARENTING THE PHOENIX: TRANSFORMATIVE LEARNING EXPERIENCES OF PARENTS OF TRANSGENDER AND NON-BINARY CHILDREN¹

Elizabeth A. McNeilly

University of Calgary

Abstract

For many parents of transgender or non-binary children, the experience is transformative learning (Mezirow, 1978). This life history study of 17 parents of children aged 6 to 29 comprised 33 interviews, 10 participant journals, and an autoethnography. Findings from the data indicated parental learning was a holistic experience (Illeris, 2003), a balance of emotion, cognition, and sociality. When one domain of learning was overstimulated, learning could be disrupted. Parents restructured their conceptions of gender, working through understandings of gender from their past and new ideas of the present. Learning also occurred in two phases: a private phase of cognitive reframing and then a more public phase as parents learned to advocate for their child. Most parents were anchored by a value of authenticity, and some mothers revisited the notion of “What makes a woman?” For some, working through discomfort was one part of the learning process.

Résumé

Pour bon nombre de personnes parentes d'enfants transgenres ou non binaires, l'expérience en est une d'apprentissage transformateur (Mezirow, 1978). Cette étude de parcours de vie de personnes parentes d'enfants de 6 ans à 29 ans comprenait 33 entrevues, 10 journaux intimes de personnes participantes et une autoethnographie. Les résultats des données indiquaient que l'apprentissage parental était une expérience holistique (Illeris, 2003), un équilibre d'émotion, de cognition et de socialité. Lorsque l'un des domaines d'apprentissage était surstimulé, l'apprentissage pouvait être perturbé. Les personnes parentes restructuraient leurs conceptions du genre, réévaluaient leurs perceptions du genre antérieures et leurs nouvelles idées générées dans le présent. L'apprentissage se produisait aussi dans deux temps, une période privée de reformulation cognitive, puis une période plus publique quand les

1 Funding for this study was provided by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council Doctoral Fellowship and the University of Calgary Werklund School of Education Doctoral Fellowship.

personnes parentes apprenaient à défendre les intérêts de leur enfant. La majorité des personnes parentes se fondaient sur la valeur de l'authenticité, et certaines mères revisitaient la notion de « ce qui fait une femme ». Pour plusieurs, traverser l'inconfort faisait partie du processus d'apprentissage.

The process of supporting a child through gender transition—wherever on the gender spectrum that transition may be—is often a transformative learning journey for parents. In 2006, Judith Butler wrote that “only by unlearning the rules and losing our ‘expertise,’ do we have a chance of exposing the field of norms and their coercive effects” (p. 533). Too often, family responds negatively to their gender-diverse family members, and this impacts the latter’s mental well-being and sense of security (Cohen et al., 2018; Ryan, 2021a). Transgender and non-binary youth experience higher levels of discrimination, depression, anxiety, and bullying than their peers, and often their harshest bullies are found within the home (Ryan, 2021b). Trans and non-binary youth have over 16 times the risk of suicide (Veale et al., 2017) and in Canada, LGBTQ account for 25% to 40% of homeless youth aged 13 to 24 (Abramovich & Shelton, 2017). Even parents who aim to be supportive of their child may exhibit “rejecting behaviours” (Ryan, 2021a) that are harmful. Kivalanka et al. (2014) suggested that “very little research has examined the experiences of parents who seek to affirm the gender identities and expressions of their transgender and gender-nonconforming children” (p. 357; see also Coolhart et al., 2018; Goldberg & Kivalanka, 2018; McGuire et al., 2016; Meadow, 2016; Norwood, 2012). The parent’s transformative journey is unique, and some parents have more conflicts to resolve and emotions to work through than others. For the parent who feels a sense of loss for the child they knew, they may feel unprepared to meet the phoenix arising from their child’s ashes.

Transformative Learning

This study aimed to analyze the transformative learning (Mezirow, 1978) that a parent undergoes as they reconcile conventional Western beliefs with emerging conceptualizations about gender. Because the past can play an integral role in transformative learning, I employed two complementary models as my theoretical lens: biographical learning (Alheit, 2018) and, as I refer to it, holistic learning (Illeris, 2003). Alheit’s (2018) concept of biographicity refers to the human ability to undergo a process of recreating or redesigning meaning when new life experience or interpretations of those events conflict with one’s current understanding of them. Transformative learning theory (Mezirow, 1978) is the process of adapting faulty perspectives and understandings to a new world view. Learning is a holistic process (Illeris, 2003), a working together of cognitive and affective aspects of learning with social learning. Maiese (2011) maintained that the affective domain works with the cognitive domain to interpret our changing environment. While intense, seemingly conflicting emotions can stall cognition, they also have the power to stimulate cognition, whether to eliminate distress or to gain clarity (Dirkx, 2008; Taylor, 2001). For parents who aim to be supportive of their gender-expansive children, their “new ‘openness’ and attunement to certain features in their surroundings involves a shift that is simultaneously both cognitive and affective” (Maiese, 2017, p. 200). Transformative learning, then, is a cognitive-affective journey, yoked together with experience.

The research in this study was framed by a psycho-critical strand (Mezirow, 1978, 1991) of transformative learning theory as many of the participants challenged conceptualizations of gender from a traditionally Western world view. One of these uncritically assimilated beliefs is how we learn to “do gender” (West & Zimmerman, 1987). Fisk and Ridgeway (2018) contended that gender frames play in the background of all social interactions and that resisting gender norms ultimately results in social sanctions, isolation, or punishment. Eagly and Wood (2012) reasoned that people reproduce gender roles and then internalize these gender identities. We see this especially when parents are distressed about *losing* their son or daughter. When gender frames are threatened, as is often the case when a parent’s understanding of gender is threatened, people tend to hold fast to their primary frames for guidance (Fisk & Ridgeway, 2018; West, 2014). This may be one reason why the experience for some parents can be challenging and emotional. In addition to exploring the transformative learning process of parents, I sought to determine if a parent’s own gender identity development informed their interpretations of the gender transition of their child.

Method

I employed life history research as a methodological framework by collecting data from a triangulation of sources: interviews, journals, and my own autoethnography. This qualitative approach allowed me to deepen my understanding of the participants’ experiences, beliefs, evolution of thought, and changing relationship with their child (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Life history research is a narrative research method hailing from anthropology and the health sciences, and it was appropriate for this study because it “explore[s] a person’s micro-historical (individual) experiences within a macro-historical (history of the time) framework” (Hagemaster, 1992). When I worked as a support group leader in PFLAG (Parents, Families, and Friends of Lesbians and Gays), I noted that their personal histories were enmeshed within their social history. The autoethnographic approach (Hayano, 1979) allowed me to analyze my own experience as a parent of a gender-fluid child who was also tied to social history, to explore the unsaid in the interviews, and to recognize my position as an insider within this research. During the research period, I wrote reflexively about my own learning journey, combed through my personal journals, and explored my emotional reactions to the narratives of participants to discover why I was affected. It was through my writing and connections to two other mothers that I gained insight into the question “What makes a woman?” which will be discussed below.

Participants and Procedures

Participants were recruited through two parent support groups in a western Canadian city. Parents (which included step-parents or legal guardians) needed to have known about their child’s gender-expansive identity for at least 6 months. Both LGBTQ support groups asked to meet with me first to be vetted, after which they distributed my flyer via email. I conducted 33 interviews with 16 parent participants of children aged 6 to 29 at the time of the study. Five couples volunteered, one couple choosing to meet individually. Six of the participants identified as male and 10 female, and their ages ranged from 33 to 74 at the time of the interviews. Three of the children identified as non-binary, eight as transgender (six male-to-female; two female-to-male), and one as transgender but not “out” in public. Ten participants recorded in journals, and I engaged in an autoethnography. Biographical

details of the participants can be found in Table 1. Two limitations of this study were its relatively small sample size and that all volunteers were White, from Canada or Europe, yet the city's visual minority percentage was approximately 30%.

Interviews took place either at the participant's home or at the support centre from where they were recruited. Interviews followed life history methodology in that in the first interview, I explored their early life and the context of their upbringing (Cole & Knowles, 2001; Goodson & Sikes, 2010), their gender identity development, and their own gender socialization. During this interview, I also asked participants if they would journal about a question that spoke to them or troubled them. During the second interview, questions focused more on the present and where they were in their relationship with their child. A third interview was offered if we did not complete the questions I had intended for the interviews or if we felt there was more to explore. As for the autoethnography, I interrogated my own experience as a mother of a gender-fluid child, explored the spaces left in interviews, and made connections.

Data Analysis

First, I manually coded the interviews and journals inductively to become intimately familiar with the text. I used process coding (Saldaña, 2013) because the parents' experiences were learning processes. For the second round of coding, I used Quirkos v2.2.1 computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software. Themes from the second set of coding followed a deductive approach as I looked to the data with my research questions in mind. This approach led to a third coding of the participants' values (Saldaña, 2013), which identified personal values, including cultural values, intrapersonal values, conflicting values, or hidden values. I audited my coding by keeping a reflexive journal in which I left not only my impressions but a "decision trail" (Hagemaster, 1992, p. 1124) outlining my rationale for drawing conclusions and making decisions regarding the data. My colleagues also reviewed my data analysis to ensure inter-rater reliability and transparency.

Findings

Presenting these findings as three "cycles"—discovery, acceptance, and allies—may appear to suggest that this process is simple, linear, and universal, but this was not the case. Each parent's journey was uniquely theirs, a negotiation of new ideas, feelings, and relationships. There were, however, similarities in the narratives of those in the early days of discovery or disclosure of their child, after which began a second cycle of tentative acceptance. At any time in these cycles, a parent may stall, withdraw, or simply linger. The final cycle differed from the first two in that it was progressively public; that is, parents began advocating for their child and standing with them as allies. The first two cycles reflected Mezirow's (1978) perspective transformation whereas the third cycle demonstrated emancipatory praxis, as defined by Hoggan et al. (2017), as thought turned to action.

Table 1: Biographical Information: 16 Participants Plus Researcher

Parent pseudonym	Relation to child	Child's pseudonym (before/after transition)	Child's affirmed gender	Child's age at revelation	Years since revelation	Number of interviews/kept journal
Dawn	Mother	Ava	MTF	21–30	4	3; yes
Adam	Father	Ava	MTF	21–30	4	3; yes
Freda	Mother	Ivory	MTF	21–30	7	3; yes
Kendra	Mother	Alice	MTF	21–30	4	3; no
Mike	Father	Alice	MTF	21–30	4	2; no
Kit	Father	Jayson/Renee	MTF	21–30	–	2; yes
Gloria	Mother	Jessica/Xavier	FTM	21–30	3	3; no
Remy	Father	Noel	Non-binary	11–20	2	2; no
Sofia	Mother	Noel	Non-binary	11–20	2	2; no
Martin	Step-father	Alex/Sophie	Non-binary/ MTF	21–30	5	3; yes
Amelia	Mother	Alex	Non-binary/ MTF	21–30	3	3; yes
Savannah	Mother	Aiden	FTM	1–10	9	3; yes
Kelley	Mother	Kayleigh	MTF	1–10	4	3; no
Alina	Mother	Chloe	MTF-not public	1–10	2–3	3; yes
Ben	Father	Chloe	MTF-not public	1–10	2–3	3; yes
Nadine	Mother	Zara	MTF	1–10	2	2; yes
Author	Mother	Sam	Non-binary/ FTM	11–20	8	–

Note. MTF = transition from assigned boy/man to affirmed girl/woman; FTM = transition from assigned girl/woman to affirmed boy/man; non-binary = umbrella term for identities that do not identify as exclusively girl/woman or boy/man.

Perspective Transformation

Perspective transformation applied to 16 of the 17 participants in this study. As a lesbian mother, Nadine did not experience perspective transformation to the same extent as the other parent participants. She was actively involved in social justice work, was well versed in gender diversity before her child transitioned, and might be defined by Ryan (2016) as a subversive parent. This section includes the first two cycles of perspective transformation (Mezirow, 1978).

Cycle 1. Discover: Troubling Gender

The first cycle begins upon disclosure or discovery of the gender-creative child. For some parents who have an understanding of gender diversity, this may not be a challenging experience. For most parents in this study, this period was their "disorienting dilemma," as coined by Mezirow (1978).

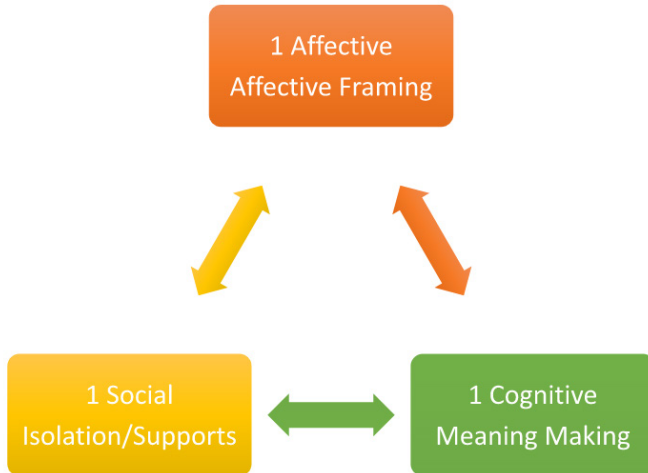


Figure 1. The First Cycle of Transformative Learning for Parents of Gender-Creative Children of All Ages

Note. This learning cycle begins at the discovery or disclosure of a gender-creative child. All cycles can and often do overlap with one another. The three cycle diagrams in Figures 1, 2, and 3 were adapted from *How We Learn: Learning and Non-Learning in School and Beyond* (2nd ed., pp. 27, 93), by K. Illeris, 2017, Routledge. Copyright 2017 by Knud Illeris. Adapted with permission.

Affective 1: Affective Framing. Emotion plays a salient role in learning because it is often the catalyst of transformative learning. For many parents in the study, this cycle was motivated by fear and, at times, denial. All parents in the study wanted to be supportive parents, but many of the parents initially hoped this was a passing phase. Nadine, Savannah, and Kelley, whose children were younger when their child’s gender diversity was discovered, seemed to be more open and curious about their child. Even fearful parents in the study were able to use this energy as an incentive to learn, even if it was only to stabilize the family. The affective domain of learning (see Figure 1) is responsible for the drive to motivate a

parent's research and, more importantly, provides the energy for the mental processes at work in the cognitive domain (Illeris, 2018). The affective domain, then, can shut down if overwhelmed, but it also propels learning when motivated to do so.

Freda, the mother of a young adult transgender child, wrote in her journal:

I probably shed the most tears in the first month. Many people amaze me that they could make the shift graciously...I've seen so many people like that and we also see a lot of them that are angry. They can't access the tears yet and the anger covers it up.

Dawn's focus was on instability. She feared her world changing and would look to her husband's masculine arms for comfort. She then questioned her own identity and began growing out her hair. Then the pivotal question "Wait a minute, do I need to look feminine here?" signalled a change in Dawn. At this point, she considered the question "What makes a woman?" and recognized that it was not hair length, but something more internal. "Once they decrease their own anxiety," wrote Gender & Family Project founder Jean Malpas (2011), "parents can control their fears and reactivity and can differentiate their child's needs from their own" (p. 457).

Cognitive 1: Hunters and Gatherers. Working in tandem with a stimulated affective domain (see Figure 1), the cognitive domain often goes into high gear as the gatherer re-evaluates old beliefs, analyzes misinformation, compares old socio-cultural norms to newer socio-cultural concepts, and attempts to revise a world view that has functioned well until this moment. The cognitive domain enables the parent to organize this complex world, to reorganize or readjust when there is disequilibrium, and to more fully comprehend their child's experience so they can be the support system their child needs. Kelley, who had a 4-year-old transgender child at the time of transition, "became obsessed with clinical studies." Savannah, after seeing journalist Katie Couric host a TV show about transgender children, recognized her child's gender dysphoria and began gathering information.

When asked what was the most challenging part of her experience, Amelia responded, "The ambiguity. Ambiguity is just not a place for most of us, me included...I've gone and read and joined support groups and so on. It feels much more substantive." Nadine gathered information too, but at a more advanced level:

It led me to find our support group, read up on trans children/youth, pay more attention to trans issues in the world, and become better at understanding gender identity, gender expression, and sex, as well as how they do and don't relate...I am better aware of "trans etiquette" so I'm now less likely to accidentally offend or harm a trans person.

Social 1: Gathering Supports. While the cognitive and affective domains are internal processes within the parent, the social or socio-cultural domain (see Figure 1) is where a parent learns through listening to or watching others. According to Illeris's (2018) domains of holistic learning, this domain is the site of interaction and integration, where minds and hearts come together to communicate and interact. Support groups ultimately offered information, emotional support, and a forum where parents could find others in a similar situation. Many had well-meaning friends who were supportive but "didn't get it," as Kelley phrased it. "I was trying to network and trying to connect Kayleigh with people that are just like her. Somewhere where she's not a 'freak.' Where there's nothing wrong with her." Kelley

later discovered some support groups online for parents of gender-expansive children around the world. Dawn, too, found that support groups were a place where she could express her innermost fears and thoughts. She admitted, "I don't say that to [Ava], that stays inside here [points to forehead] or it can come out at our support meetings when we talk with other parents. We say these things that we absolutely cannot say in front of our children." These meetings are a place where shared fears, doubts, anger, frustration, shame, and other harboured emotions can surface safely and be worked through with others who are further ahead in the journey.

Cycle 2. Acceptance: Broadening Gender Frames

The second cycle (see Figure 2) begins when a parent has, whether willingly or not, realized a transition of some sort would take place. The second phase is also where real learning begins.

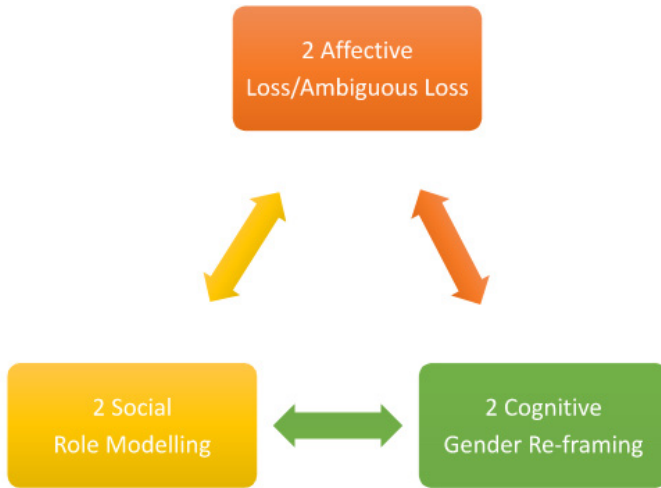


Figure 2. The Second Cycle of Transformative Learning for Parents of Gender-Creative Children of All Ages

Note. This learning cycle is prompted by the acknowledgement that transition will occur, whether the parent is ready or not. (See also the Figure 1 note.)

Affective 2: Lost and Found. With “ambiguous loss” (Boss, 1999), the ambiguity lies in what has been lost. While a sense of loss was felt by most parents in the study, the intense grief associated with ambiguous loss tended to be felt by parents of older or adult children. Dawn, for instance, mentioned her discovery that having a son was an important part of her self-identity. Gloria shared a similar experience, but due to unique circumstances, she avoided prolonged ambiguous loss. She explained,

Early on, you think, “Jessica is no more and Xavier is who it will be.” I think that quickly rectified itself in that I had a cousin and I had a friend both of whom had lost their young adult children...If I felt a sense of

mourning or loss because I've lost my daughter, it just felt very, I don't know, selfish of me.

Amelia's case was intriguing in that she did not experience ambiguous loss when her child identified as gender fluid, but she felt great anxiety at the "loss" of Alex when he discussed full transition to female. In the former case, Amelia felt she still had a piece of her son to hold onto. She said, "I think that's what the loss is, that Alex was going to go away and Sophie was going to show up and I'd never met her and I didn't know who she was. She was taking over and he was going to go." Amelia saw Sophie as separate, or alien, to Alex, and there was a sense of uneasiness that Sophie was usurping her son's body.

Cognitive 2: Stereotypes, the Trojan Horse. It is not uncommon for people to resort to stereotypes when socio-cultural norms are challenged (Fisk & Ridgeway, 2018; Ryan, 2016). Dawn learned to challenge concealed stereotypes when judging a hairstyle. At first she didn't think her daughter's hair was feminine enough, but then she thought, "Wait a minute, you can have a bald head and be female, that's just an outward appearance thing. It's got nothing to do with your gender." Her husband, Adam, also learned to challenge stereotypes, as his only frames of reference for transgender people were stereotypes from social media. Amelia experienced an epiphany during an interview with her and her husband. Although she had read much, she admitted that she was afraid that the female side of her gender-fluid child would not like her. She said,

One of my experiences in college was [that] I always hung out with the guys because we talked politics and economics and the women, the girls I knew in college, were all about talking about boys and nail polish and stuff that I was not into, so I have never been a girly girl... So in my brain I say, "Well, Alex will still be in there and he'll still be reading Plato, but that won't be Sophie. That will be Alex inside Sophie." You see, I can't quite wrap my head around it.

When I suggested that she might be making a stereotype out of her daughter, she exclaimed, "That's it! That's what I was afraid of. I'm afraid she's going to become a woman I can't connect to." Once the stereotype was identified, Amelia began the process of challenging it. In my own autoethnographic work, I noted that I was triggered by Amelia's situation and some of the other mother's thoughts about womanhood and the implications of transition for womanhood. Writing unearthed a history of frustration and unprocessed anger I had buried during my own experiences with a traditional religion in my youth, with its expectations of women, and then the woman's liberation movement I witnessed in the 1970s and '80s and the freedom it promised. Neither of these conflicting images of womanhood made room for my (at the time) transgender child, as they both operated on the understanding that gender was binary. I saw my trans son as a betrayer in many ways, while Kendra saw her trans daughter as foolishly giving up privilege. When my child transitioned, I remember my anger and how I thought it strange and inappropriate at the time. Through the process of re-evaluating my experience and the stereotypes that challenged me regarding womanhood, I recognized that this concept still warranted deeper analysis, which I will return to in the discussion.

Social 2: New Roles and Role Models. Role modelling was a benefit of attending support groups as newer attendees look to experienced parents and the support group leaders for direction. Meeting gender-expansive people who have found contentment in

their transition was also impactful. During one of Dawn and Adam's first support group meetings, they met a woman who had transitioned in her 50s. Dawn learned that she was an engineer and that the company supported her transition. Her wife also supported her and stayed with her because, as she said, "You're my best friend." Dawn said, "It was very heartwarming to see that even with the exterior appearance that is out of the norm, this person could still have a satisfying life." For Dawn and Adam, this experience gave them courage and hope. When Amelia met gender-creative artist and scholar Vivek Shraya, she wrote in her journal,

I work in tears, needing to write...As Martin and I were leaving, Vivek Shraya was there, also leaving, and I was able to speak to her, thank her, tell her that more than anything she left me feeling so very, very proud of our son. I love him for questioning, for exploring, for being who he and she is. And I will learn to surf on my tears. There is enough energy there to carry me a long way.

As stated earlier, role models often provided parents with comfort and direction.

Emancipatory Praxis

The third cycle (see Figure 3), emancipatory praxis, as described by Hoggan et al. (2017), is when a parent either quietly or loudly challenges Westernized social norms. It is when private becomes public. Hoggan et al. (2017) argued that perspective transformation could indeed be emancipatory on a biographical level or on an institutional or societal one. The parents in this study demonstrated emancipatory praxis personally and publicly.

Cycle 3. Allies: Applying Gender Frames

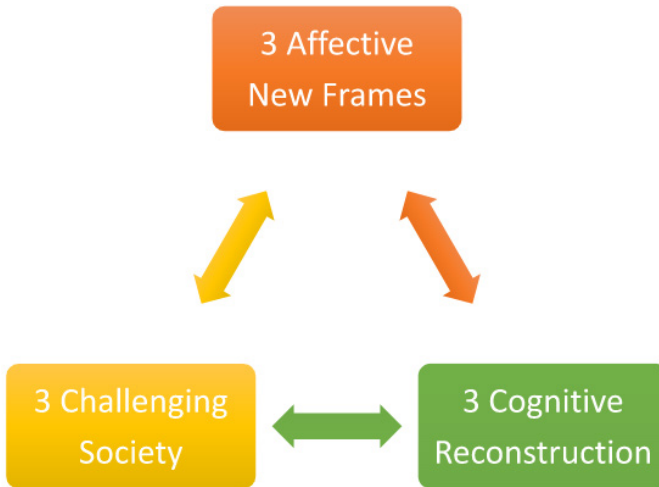


Figure 3. The Third Cycle of Transformative Learning for Parents of Gender-Creative Children of All Ages

Note. This learning cycle begins when a parent's inward learning journey extends outward. (See also the Figure 1 note.)

Affective 3: Adjusting Frames of Gender. Since many parents have been raised in a society that has traditionally reinforced gender roles and their presentation, it is not surprising when they initially feel discomfort when their child challenges these norms. For once, “trusting your gut” or going with what “feels right” might not be reliable if the gender norms themselves are too rigid. Anything that does not align with traditional gendered expectations might “feel wrong” to someone who has not examined the gender frames (Fisk & Ridgeway, 2018). Most parents in this study spent some time analyzing gendered expectations and prescribed gender roles because their children challenged them. Of this experience, Ben said, “It does also seem very right. It seems to fit into place. Probably an outside person who isn’t studying gender rules and everything would be, ‘Oh, that’s weird or not right or not natural or anything.’ But here with Cameron, it seems right.” Ben has moved beyond the discomfort to feeling comfortable with his newer understandings of gender.

Freda said,

I think before I was more concerned about what others thought. I was more concerned about how I was perceived. Now I don’t care. You can construe whatever story you need to construe; I know that I love my child and my child loves me and the rest doesn’t matter.

When developing new frames of gender, a parent challenges their understandings, their reactions and feelings, and the socio-cultural norms in the society around them. Amelia shared an analogy that suggested the subtle difference she felt when interacting with her gender-fluid child. She said that when she was with her cousins in Europe, “sometimes I’m speaking French, sometimes I’m speaking German, sometimes I’m speaking English, and the person who I am when I speak French isn’t quite who I am when I speak English.” She then compared this nuanced shift to her interactions with her child: “Then I just say, ‘Who are you today?’ Then I’ll speak to that person.” By reframing gender, Amelia expanded her understanding of gender identity to accommodate genders outside the binary.

Cognitive 3: Gender Reconstruction. For many of the participants, their child’s transition was a time of cognitive dissonance, epiphanies, cognitive shifts, and new understandings. Adam’s understanding came when he appreciated the difference between gender and sex: “Now that I understand it, the pieces of the puzzle are fitting together. Sex is between your legs and gender is between your ears.” Kendra recognized that her trans daughter was not “choosing” to be female. At first, when considering her child’s declaration to transition from boy to girl, she thought,

What the fuck’s wrong with you? Like, you’ve got reserved a more privileged place. Why would you want to take that step back?... Then I realized that had nothing to do with what she was choosing. She wasn’t choosing it in any way like that. She was choosing to express what she felt rather than what society wanted.”

Kendra’s epiphany allowed her to realize that her daughter was choosing to socially transition; her transgender identity was not a choice.

Alina shared how her understanding of gender began to clarify when she compared the gender spectrum to other spectrums in nature. She said, “I definitely started thinking it was a continuum because I was sort of thinking that a lot more things are a continuum than

I realized. Autism is on a continuum. We're all probably on that continuum somewhere, from very few of us having none of those autistic behaviours to the most." Ben shared that he learned not to shut down, that it is okay that gender is complicated, with shades of grey. He explained he was a

little more educated. The more I'm educated, the more I know I don't know much about anything. It's not black and white, it's not just guys dressing like girls, it's not that. It's a lot more involved and I don't understand it all, but that's okay, I kind of get that I don't understand. I don't just shut down.

This couple worked together to challenge misunderstandings and build new ones in their place.

Social 3: Challenging the Status Quo. It was one thing to share in a support group, but for many participants, telling others was a terrifying thought. As parents became more knowledgeable and confident in their ability to parent their gender-expansive child, this changed. Instead, parents developed a need to advocate on their child's behalf. Savannah became comfortable enough to share her experiences with others at work: "What I've found is when I do open up and tell that story, it opens up the conversation from them [at work] too. People have come out at work." Remy and Sofia chose to support their non-binary child and have become more visible at work. Sofia said, "I put on my wall, the symbols, the flag, the safe space. Do you know? More militant. If you need me, I am here." Remy and Sofia are both still learning about non-binary gender identity and how to navigate society as non-binary, but they both advocate for their child and challenge the status quo. Amelia said, "I find myself educating friends in the limited amount that I'm able to do because most people I know haven't run into this. I'm able to share what I've learned." Amelia is just one of many parents who overcame their fears to feel comfortable sharing what they have learned and advocating publicly on their child's behalf.

Authenticity

Three other findings—authenticity, inability to learn, and feminist tensions—also arose in the data. As for authenticity, I had supposed that a parent's personal sense of gender identity would inform their understanding of their child, but this assumption proved incorrect. Authenticity was at the heart of learning. When parents were asked to share their heroes or role models, they often chose people who were true to themselves, stood for what they believed, and lived their lives authentically. My son expressed his appreciation of my support of his true self in a birthday card inscription to me: "Your flexibility and open-mindedness have helped me become the same and your acceptance of my queerness and madness has made it immensely easier to love and accept myself." Some parents also shared experiences of meeting gender-expansive people who made an impact on them for living their authentic lives beautifully and with dignity.

Mike, who was raised on a farm, *knew* he was not destined for farming. On living authentically, he said, "Yes, if you're given the opportunity to experience the things that validate you, that's what I'm thinking, but society wants to push you in a direction, right?" Now he sees himself in his daughter as she has found what validates her. For Dawn, authenticity was reinforced through a moving experience. She wrote,

Having felt like I lost my child and like I just didn't know who she was, I experienced a pivotal moment when she and I were sitting on the sofa side by side and as I looked into her eyes—I saw her soul. It was the same soul that I had come to know and love for all those years. I felt relief and comfort along with understanding that this was the same person.

After having told her child to “be yourself” for a decade, Dawn appreciated the irony of not recognizing her child who had never left and was not lost at all.

Freda's example extended to her church, where the pastor was supportive of her and a few other LGBTQ families in the church membership. In her journal, Freda wrote,

Our pastors took a lot of abuse from some homophobic church members who are very vocal about not liking the new, more affirmative position that has transpired. Right now, our church has a smaller attendance, we have a smaller budget, and some people are still quite vocal about their disapproval—but it is real.

Although I did hear stories of religious intolerance during the interviews, this story illustrated the courage of the pastors and church members who supported Freda's family, very publicly, to live authentically.

When Learning Stalls

At times, even when a parent is willing to be supportive of their child, a parent's struggle can lead back to their own experience with gender. Freda called these “black holes.” She explained,

Black holes are when there's, like, if you've not healed your issues, there are some places that you just can't go and it's like you fall into them and nobody can reach you and you feel lost and you don't know why you're lost. You react in ways you don't understand...It's just an emotional black hole that—it just raises fear and you just can't go there. You've got some healing to do first.

Freda had spent time with a counsellor years before her transgender daughter came out to her, working through issues of incest. She conjectured that had she not had counselling, her child's disclosure would have sucked her into a black hole.

There are many examples of when learning stalled for these parents. One was unable to progress due to emotional harm. According to Kit, he carried deep emotional scars from family incest in his youth. He confided,

My emotions became almost totally frozen to the point where I paid no attention to how I was feeling and if you actually asked, I had no clue.” As he matured into an adult, he became a sex addict and he admitted that his “own addiction didn't help because it drives me away from real people. I'm sure Jayson [Renee, his transgender child] still has scars of that. I wasn't there at home. Even when I was there, I wasn't there emotionally.

Kit was an interesting case in that he appeared to want to be supportive, but his emotional scarring would need to resolve before he could be supportive on an emotional level.

Feminist Tensions

"What makes a woman?" has been a recurrent theme through the years as political, cultural, and personal climates shift. For feminist mothers who have known only a gender binary, outraged that one gender dominates the other, the emergence of a gender-expansive child can stir up many emotions and questions. Older conceptions of gender arise that have not been scrutinized through the lens of time and experience. Amelia wrestled with her fears and frustrations, but eventually surmised, "The question is: What makes a woman?" Our newer conceptions of the non-binary nature of gender forced Amelia and me, in particular, to redefine what it meant to be a woman. Our first reactions were born out of experience, our resistance to hegemonic masculinity. Amelia was fearful that her daughter would be a "girly girl," someone she could not relate to. In my experience, I subconsciously resented my "daughter" *deserting* us. In many ways, our children pressed us to redefine womanhood in new ways. "What makes a woman?" is a question taken up by many of the third-wave and fourth-wave feminist groups who are making room for their transgender sisters.

Discussion

This study on the learning processes of parents demonstrated that most participant parents experienced a two-phase transformation, a deeply personal transformation and then a more public transformation as they became advocates for their children, challenging the status quo. In this process, parents came to realize that the familiar Western metanarrative (Lyotard, 1979/1984) of the gender binary not only denied their child's full expression of authenticity but sustained an illusion of gender duality that is restrictive for all. Indeed, more individuals are identifying as non-binary in recent years and are living authentically, and the gender spectrum is thickening at the midpoint (Goldberg & Kivalanka, 2018; Meadow, 2016). If more people are living authentically in the middle of the spectrum, free from gender constrictions and categories, then this might suggest that gender variance has been under-documented in traditional gender identity development theories, as suggested in transfamily theory (McGuire et al., 2016). Arguably, future research in this area is warranted as parents of non-binary children have the unique challenge of supporting a child who is transitioning to a largely unexplored or fluid place along the gender spectrum. Even the term spectrum is becoming outdated, as the image of a line segment is itself limiting; instead, The Trevor Project (2022) portrays gender identity as a colourful cloud with boy/man, girl/woman, and non-binary written around the edges and agender/genderless at the centre. One can identify themselves at one point within the cloud or at a few points that are stationary or fluid. With more freedom of expression, the language is evolving as well. A study demonstrating this trend asked its non-binary participants to self-identify their gender identity using their own choice of terms. Those over the age of 32 identified themselves as *cross-dressers*, while those under age 32 self-identified using a wide variety of terms, such as *genderqueer* or *gender fluid* (Meadow, 2016). Moreover, some who are queering gender would rather not be defined at all. Studying the process of parents attempting to reframe gender when their children are unframeable would allow for the exploration of how parents live with or embrace ambiguity.

One area worth discussing is the notion of discomfort. Neurobiologist António Damásio (1999) noted that our feelings serve an evolutionary purpose: to keep us safe from harm. We nestle in our comfort zone (White, 2009) and if we venture beyond we may feel discomfort

or what Mälkki (2019) refers to as *edge-emotions*. When children challenge gender norms and actively disrupt the binary, parents can begin feeling discomfort. Parents have been raised and conditioned and their behaviours reinforced in the very society they are now interrogating; therefore, discomfort is often a natural part of relearning. Most parents have trusted their feelings until this point, and yet this is one moment when parents can question them. Mälkki (2019) argued that these edge-emotions are the “gateway to critical reflection” (p. 59), as “discomfort calls not only for inquiry but also, at critical junctures, for action” (Boler, 1999, p. 179). It invites the parent to work through traditional conceptions of gender pitted against newer, broader conceptions. Instead of resisting, resenting, or repelling uncomfortable feelings, parents can re-evaluate metanarratives of gender, reject negative feelings that no longer serve a purpose, and move forward with a stronger commitment to social justice.

Finally, for three mothers in the study, the question “What makes a woman?” became a central inquiry, and the answer was key to their understanding of their child and themselves. Dawn was able to let go of stereotypes that crowded her judgment when her daughter was mid-transition and appearing androgynous. Amelia also found herself resorting to stereotypes. Her fear of connecting with her “new daughter” was based on her limited definition of what it meant to be a woman, a definition that in many ways excluded even herself. As feminists, Amelia and I both wrestled with emotions as older conceptualizations of a gender dichotomy resurfaced. My query regarding womanhood was transformed when my child began blending gender, queering the binaries, and demonstrating that there is no *woman* or *man*. That is, where along the spectrum does woman end and man begin? In this way, mothers were liberated from the constraints of gender along with their children.

Conclusion

The collective narratives of these participants tell a compelling story of personal changes and social challenges. Broadening, bending, and breaking gender conventions is an emancipatory act. These parents not only experienced transformative learning on a personal level, but they actively emancipated themselves from the gender norms of Western society while transforming the gender norms themselves through their actions. This transformation does not just affect the parents; because transition is rarely a private experience, it also affects those associated with the child who transitions—teachers, friends and their parents, extended family, or coaches. Because these people may not have much experience with gender diversity, they often look to the parent for direction or even affirmation. In this respect, the findings of this study suggest that the two-phase transformative learning of parents has the potential to be a powerful force in not only educating others, but potentially reducing stigma, normalizing gender variance, and thereby promoting inclusivity.

References

- Abramovich, A., & Shelton, J. (Eds.). (2017). *Where am I going to go? Intersectional approaches to ending LGBTQ2S youth homelessness in Canada & the U.S.* Canadian Observatory on Homelessness Press. <https://www.homelesshub.ca/WhereAmIGoingtoGo>
- Allheit, P. (2018). Biographical learning: Within the lifelong learning discourse. In K. Illeris (Ed.), *Contemporary theories of learning: Learning theorists...in their own words* (pp. 153–165). Routledge.

- Boler, M. (1999). *Feeling power: Emotions and education*. Routledge.
- Boss, P. (1999). *Ambiguous loss: Learning to live with unresolved grief*. Harvard University Press.
- Butler, J. (2006). Response. *British Journal of Sociology in Education*, 27(4), 529–534. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01425690600803194>
- Cohen, J., Mannarino, A., Wilson, K., & Zinny, A. (2018). *Trauma-focused cognitive behavioral therapy LGBTQ implementation manual*. Allegheny Health Network.
- Cole, A. L., & Knowles, J. G. (2001). *Lives in context: The art of life history research*. AltaMira Press.
- Coolhart, D., Ritenour, K., & Grodzinski, A. (2018). Experiences of ambiguous loss for parents of transgender male youth: A phenomenological exploration. *Contemporary Family Therapy*, 40(1), 28–41. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10591-017-9426-x>
- Damáσιο, A. R. (1999). *The feeling of what happens: The body and emotion in the making of consciousness*. Harcourt Brace.
- Dirkx, J. (2008). The meaning and role of emotions in adult learning. *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education*, 120, 7–18.
- Eagly, A. H., & Wood, W. (2012). Social role theory. In P. A. Van Lange, A. W. Kruglanski, & E. T. Higgins (Eds.), *Handbook of theories in social psychology* (Vol. 2, pp. 458–476). <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781446249222.n49>
- Fisk, S. R., & Ridgeway, C. L. (2018). Framing gender. In B. J. Risman, C. M. Froyum, & W. J. Scarborough (Eds.), *Handbook of the sociology of gender*. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-76333-0_12
- Goldberg, A., & Kusalanka, K. (2018). Navigating identity development and community belonging when “there are only two boxes to check”: An exploratory study of nonbinary trans college students. *Journal of LGBT Youth*, 15(2), 106–131. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19361653.2018.1429979>
- Goodson, I., & Sikes, P. (2010). *Life history research in educational settings*. Open University Press.
- Hagemaster, J. N. (1992). Life history: A qualitative method of research. *The Journal of Advanced Nursing*, 17(9), 1122–1128. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1365-2648.1992.tb02047.x>
- Hayano, D. M. (1979). Auto-ethnography: Paradigms, problems, and prospects. *Human Organization*, 38, 113–120.
- Hoggan, C., Mälkki, K., & Finnegan, F. (2017). Developing the theory of perspective transformation: Continuity, intersubjectivity, and emancipatory praxis. *Adult Education Quarterly*, 67(1), 48–64. <http://doi.org/10.1177/0741713616674076>
- Illeris, K. (2003). Towards a contemporary and comprehensive theory of learning. *International Journal of Lifelong Education*, 22(4), 396–406. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02601370304837>
- Illeris, K. (2017). *How we learn: Learning and non-learning in school and beyond* (2nd ed.). Routledge.
- Illeris, K. (2018). *Contemporary theories of learning: Learning theorists...in their own words*. Routledge.
- Kusalanka, K. A., Weiner, J., & Mahan, D. (2014). Child, family, and community transformations: Findings from interviews with mothers of transgender girls. *Journal of GLBT Family Studies*, 10, 354–379. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1550428X.2013.834529>

- Lyotard, J. (1984). *The postmodern condition: A report on knowledge*. University of Minnesota. (Original work published 1979)
- Maiese, M. (2011). *Embodiment, emotion, and cognition: New directions in philosophy and cognitive science*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Maiese, M. (2017). Transformative learning, enactivism, and affectivity. *Studies in Philosophy and Education*, 36(2), 197–216.
- Mälkki, K. (2019). Coming to grips with edge-emotions: The gateway to critical reflection and transformative learning. In T. Fleming, A. Kokkos, & F. Finnegan (Eds.), *European perspectives on transformation theory* (pp. 59–73). Palgrave Macmillan Cham. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-19159-7_5
- Malpas, J. (2011). Between pink and blue: A multi-dimensional family approach to gender nonconforming children and their families. *Family Process*, 50(4), 453–470. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1545-5300.2011.01371.x>
- McGuire, J. K., Kuvalanka, K. A., Catalpa, J. M., & Toomey, R. B. (2016). Transfamily theory: How the presence of trans* family members informs gender development in families. *Journal of Family Theory & Review*, 8(March), 60–73. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jftr.12125>
- Meadow, T. (2016). Toward trans* epistemology: Imagining the lives of transgender people. *Women's Studies Quarterly*, 44(3&4), 319–323.
- Merriam, S., & Tisdell, E. J. (2016). *Qualitative research: A guide to design and implementation* (4th ed.). Jossey-Bass.
- Mezirow, J. (1978). Perspective transformation. *Adult Education*, 28(2), 100.
- Mezirow, J. (1991). *Transformative dimensions of adult learning*. Jossey-Bass
- Norwood, K. (2012). Transitioning meanings? Family members' communicative struggles surrounding transgender identity. *Journal of Family Communication*, 12(1), 75–92. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15267431.2010.509283>
- Ryan, C. (2021a). *Helping diverse families learn to support their LGBTQ children to prevent health and mental health risks and promote well-being*. Family Acceptance Project. San Francisco State University. https://familyproject.sfsu.edu/sites/default/files/documents/FAP-overview-booklet%20_Online.pdf
- Ryan, C. (2021b, June). The trauma-focused CBT and family acceptance project: An integrated framework for children and youth (Sexual and Gender Minorities Special Report Part 2). *Psychiatric Times*. <https://www.psychiatristimes.com/view/the-trauma-focused-cbt-and-family-acceptance-project>
- Ryan, K. N. (2016). “My mom says some girls have penises”: How mothers of gender-diverse youth are pushing gender ideology forward (and how they're not). *Social Sciences*, 5(73), 1–21. <https://doi.org/10.3390/socsci5040073>
- Saldaña, J. (2013). *The coding manual for qualitative researchers*. SAGE Publications.
- Taylor, E. W. (2001). Transformative learning theory: A neurobiological perspective of the role of emotions and unconscious ways of knowing. *International Journal of Lifelong Education*, 20(3), 218–236.
- The Trevor Project. (2022). *Coming out: A handbook for LGBTQ young people*. <https://www.thetrevorproject.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/Coming-Out-Handbook.pdf>
- Veale, J. F, Watson, R. J., Peter, T., & Saewyc, E. M. (2017, January). Mental health disparities among Canadian transgender youth. *Journal of Adolescent Health*, 60(1), 44–49. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jadohealth.2016.09.014>
- West, C., & Zimmerman, D. H. (1987). Doing gender. *Gender & Society*, 1(2), 125–151.

- West, L. (2014). Transformational learning and the form that transforms: Towards a psychosocial theory of recognition using auto/biographical narrative research. *Journal of Transformative Education*, 12(2), 164–179. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1541344614536054>
- White, A. (2008). *From comfort zone to performance management: Understanding development and performance*. White & MacLean Publishing.