

Transgender Parents: Struggles, Strategies and Stories of Transformation

A Critical Review of the Literature

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INTRODUCTION

- There is a growing body of research addressing the experiences of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender (trans) and queer (LGBTQ) parents.
- There is a dearth of research which specifically addresses trans parents. Where this research exists, trans parenting experiences are rarely explored through the lens of discrimination.
- A review of trans parenting literature finds that the assumption of cisnormativity underpins social research in this field and manifests in discrimination in family planning policy and practice, and biased child custody decisions.

METHODOLOGY

- A narrative review method was used, aiming to gain an understanding of, and to summarize what was known in the area of trans parenting.
- Electronic databases were searched using relevant keywords and a wide range of sources were used, including: empirical research; journal articles; books; grey literature reports; resource manuals; relevant legal cases; and some first person accounts found in books and anthologies.
- Relevant references cited in the resulting sources were reviewed and experts in the field were consulted to locate additional sources.
- Criteria for inclusion was any specific reference to trans parents or their children.
- A total of 107 sources were included.

LANGUAGE AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

- *Trans* is an umbrella term encompassing transgender, transsexual, transitioned, gender queer and some two-spirited people.
- *Sex* refers to the biological body and *gender* to social identity and expression. An understanding of gender as something with fluidity and diversity departs radically from the dominant belief that sex is immutable and fixed at birth.
- The relatively recent concept of *cisnormativity* is useful in exposing the belief in universal correspondence between sex and gender as merely an assumption.
- Cisnormativity is the belief that all those born male will naturally become men, and those born female, will naturally become women.¹
- Cisnormativity is accepted as reality in adoption and assisted human reproduction policy and practice, and is entrenched as legal truth in family courts, thus erasing the possibility of trans existence and in so doing facilitating discrimination in the lives of trans parents.

CISNORMATIVE ASSUMPTIONS IN SOCIAL RESEARCH

- Research has been conducted using a deficit lens, asking if the children of trans parents can be as *healthy* as other children.
- Research has focused on gender identity and sexual orientation among these children. Though consistently finding no correlation between parent and child gender identity, this inquiry belies an assumption that a cisgender (non-trans) identity is the ideal and normal child outcome.
- Research exploring psychological distress and social stigma among the children of trans parents suggests that risk factors relate more to high levels of marital conflict and abrupt loss of parenting contact, than to a parents gender transition, in and of itself.
- Emerging first-person narratives of the children of trans parents highlight possibilities previously precluded by theoretical biases, such as: parent-child interdependence; mutual care; innovation; and the exercise of agency in how families address stigma.

DISCRIMINATION IN FAMILY PLANNING POLICY AND PRACTICE: ADOPTION AND ASSISTED HUMAN REPRODUCTION

- In the US context, some states have prohibited adoption by gay and lesbian (and presumably trans) parents. No country currently permits international adoption to LGBTQ people.
- Research measuring public attitudes to trans people adopting shows limited support even in jurisdictions where this right is legally held.
- In Ontario, no law prohibits trans adoption, yet research indicates that adoption workers lack the necessary knowledge to facilitate this.
- Trans people's requests for donor insemination have been treated as controversial by some AHR Clinics, sparking debates in the literature which question the ethics of allowing trans people to become parents.
- In the wake of media coverage of pregnant trans men, there is evidence of recent state mobilization in several countries to limit the ability of trans men to gain legal status as men while maintaining reproductive capacity.

BIAS IN CHILD CUSTODY DECISION-MAKING

- Existing legal literature indicates that in the US, no form of parenthood is secure for trans parents (adoption, marriage or biological relationship).
- Cisnormativity is entrenched as legal truth and manifests in: court failure to remedy legal voids for transgender people; misuse of the "best interests of the child" standard; and failure to address parental alienation.
- In some US states, parentage depends on legal marriage, which depends on legal sex. State definitions of sex are incompatible, thus a trans person's sex, marriage status, and parental rights fluctuate across state lines.
- In Canada, a legal precedent has been set that trans identity has no bearing on child custody, though discrimination can precede court involvement.

Cisnormativity

The pervasive assumption that all those born male will naturally become men, and all those born female will naturally become women.



Assumptions underlying social research with trans parents

Discrimination against trans parents in family planning policy and practice

Bias against trans parents in child custody decision-making

GAPS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

- The possibility of parenting strengths among trans parents, because of, rather than in spite of their trans identity, has been underexplored. Research highlighting unique trans approaches to parenting is needed.
- Research is needed to further identify discrimination and barriers for trans people in family planning policy and practice.
- Training is needed to build the capacity of adoption workers and assisted human reproduction clinicians to work effectively with trans clients and remove service barriers.
- US legal scholars call for the use of gender identity as the legal definition of sex in place of anatomy, and for discontinuing the consideration of trans identity as a factor in child custody decision-making.
- In Canada, more research is needed to explore trans parents' experiences with child custody and access arrangements.
- Further research is needed into the experiences of trans led-families in schools and early childhood education settings. In addition, research is needed to explore the intersections of multiple identities for trans parents who are racialized, newcomers, or living with disabilities.

REFERENCES

1. Bauer, G., Hammond, R., Travers, R., Kaay, M., Hohenadel, K., Boyce, M. (2009). I don't think this is theoretical; This is our lives": How erasure impacts health care for transgender people. *Journal of the Association of Nurses in AIDS Care*. 20(5), 348-361.

This review is part of a manuscript in progress. All other citations are available upon request.

UPCOMING RESEARCH

This literature review is the initial stage of a Toronto-based qualitative inquiry into experiences of discrimination among trans parents and the strengths they bring to parenting. This project is supported by the Centre for the Study of Gender, Social Inequities and Mental Health and the Community One Foundation.

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