

ANNA KLONKOWSKA
University of Gdansk

“...I’m Not Unaccepting, I’m Just Concerned...” **The Struggles of Polish Parents of Trans Youths**

Abstract: The dominant notion of gender identity in Poland has been strongly influenced by essentialist concepts of gender roles. Consequently, transgender youths and their parents often experience social stigmatization, with the latter having their parenting skills called into question by people in their surrounding social environment. This has caused self-accusation among many parents, which may have influenced their own attitudes towards their children’s gender identity. The following paper details the subsequent outcomes of a qualitative research study conducted in Poland among the parents of transgender youths. The results of this research show the attitudes of trans youths parents towards their children’s gender identity; the initial reactions to their children coming out; their personal feelings; the process of reframing and reworking their stances.

Keywords: transgender, gender nonconforming, youths, parents, parental support

Introduction

Early studies of gender nonconforming children and youths undertaken by mental health practitioners and researchers in the 1960s and 1970s (e.g. [Bates et al. 1979](#); [Bates et al. 1974](#); [Bentler et al. 1979](#); [Green 1967, 1968](#); [Green & Money 1964](#); [Rekers 1977, 1979](#)) have concurred with the creation of the nosological category of Gender Identity Disorder of Childhood in the DSM-III ([APA 1980](#)), causing controversies from both medical and social standpoints (e.g. [Bartlett et al. 2000](#); [Butler 2004](#); [Feder 1999](#); [Haldeman 2000](#); [Wilchins 1997](#); [Wilson et al. 2002](#); for a detailed discussion see: [Bryant 2006](#)).

Transgender children and youths have existed long before the term transgender—or earlier transsexuality—was coined (see: [Gill-Peterson 2018](#)). Yet, beside occasional commentaries on medical discourse, until recently social studies have focused mainly on transgender and gender nonconforming adults, which has left children and youths barely visible in the ongoing debate on the social constructions of gender. “In the early twenty-first century, however, multiple constituencies are vying to define the terms of the transgender child and to secure explanations of the etiology, prevalence, and characteristics of this emergent identity group” ([Meadow 2014: 57](#)).

It is probable that because of social functioning and the depiction of a child as a potential persons who is at the stage of becoming, their identity status (in many aspects) has always been perceived as being uncertain, flexible, and under construction, and therefore prone to experimentation and undergoing “test phasing.” As a result, and unlike that of adult gender

identities, children's and youths' gender incongruence or gender nonconforming attitudes, are more likely to be interpreted through a lens obfuscated by uncertainty and precaution.

For a child to claim a transgender status (or for an adult to claim transgender status for a child) is difficult because the child is always already seen as incomplete, as not yet fully formed; its gender is not fully mature, and the child is also seen as not fully capable of knowing its own gender. At the same time, precisely because of this not-yet-complete status, the child is especially subject to scrutiny with regard to its gender (...). (Castañeda 2014: 59–60).

The early twenty-first century brought about a much broader perspective into the debate on gender nonconforming children (Meadow 2014), which resulted in research and publications unveiling more information about the childhood and adolescence experiences of transgender youths, both from a clinical, as well as social perspective (e.g. Zucker 2005; Travers 2018; Baum et al. 2010; Gill-Peterson 2018).

In the early twenty-first century, there was also a significant change made in the therapeutic approaches towards transgender youths. Instead of therapeutic interventions in the form of behavior modification (e.g. Rekers 1975; Rekers et al. 1974; Rekers & Mead 1980), contemporary guidelines for professionals started to promote a more affirmative approach towards transgender and gender nonconforming youths and their families (e.g. Pyne 2014; Hidalgo et al. 2013; Janssen & Leibowitz 2018; Hill et al. 2010). Thus, there was an increase in the number of publications regarding guidelines for professionals working with transgender and gender nonconforming youth (e.g. Vincent 2018; Krieger 2017; Cicero & Wesp 2017; Levine & AAPCA 2013), as well as academic discussions about the paradigm changes (e.g. Drescher & Byne 2013; Zucker et al. 2012; de Vries et al. 2006; de Vries & Cohen-Kettenis 2012).

Notably, there was a strong emphasis placed upon the significance of supporting not only transgender youths, but also their families (e.g. Wallace & Russell 2013; Pyne 2012; Rosenberg & Jellinek 2002; Vanderburgh 2009), since immediate family acceptance and involvement in the process of transition has an immense value on the well-being of children and youths (e.g. C. Ryan et al. 2010; C. Ryan 2009; Koken et al. 2009; Simons et al. 2013; Travers et al. 2012; Olson et al. 2016). The latter is of great significance, especially in light of data indicating there to be potential suicide risk among transgender persons, as well as life-threatening behavior among transgender and gender nonconforming youths (e.g. Grossman & D'Augelli 2007; Bauer et al. 2015; Liu & Mustanski 2012; Budge et al. 2013; Clements-Nolle et al. 2006; Haas et al. 2011; Maguen & Shepherd 2010; Terada 2011).

An increase in family involvement becomes apparent when we consider the number of new publications with guidelines for the parents of transgender children and youths (e.g. Angello & Bowman 2016; Angello 2013; Brill & Pepper 2008; Brill & Kenney 2016; Nealy 2017; Krieger 2018; Ehrensaft 2011; Ehrensaft 2016; Murchison 2016) as well as memoirs and autoethnographies written by supportive parents, mostly written by mothers (e.g. Evans 2016; Whittington 2016; Duron 2013; Barkin 2017; Tarney 2016; Pepper 2012).

And yet—besides appreciation of the significance of the role the immediate family plays in supporting the transition process (e.g. Malpas 2011; Bhattacharya et al. 2020)—it is only in the last decade that the research on the parents of transgender and gender nonconforming children and youths gained wider attention. There are a number of publications on the impact of parenting styles and developing trans-affirming attitudes by parents (e.g. K. Ryan

2016, 2018; Meadow 2011, 2018; Rahilly 2015; Kivalanka et al. 2014), but there is still relatively little research on the parents' perspectives and emotions in relation to data from outside Western Anglophone countries.

This article is about the parents of transgender youths in Poland, who are upbringing their children in a conservative society which shows very little recognition or acceptance of LGBTQ+ minorities (ILGA 2020: 86–87). This text examines the situation in which these parents find themselves, as they try to understand their children's gender identities in order to be supportive. It not only focuses on the evolving comprehension of parents towards their children's transitioning, but it also takes into account their feelings, needs, and struggles in communicating with their children.

Methods

The methods employed follow the tenets of grounded theory in its constructionist conceptualization (Charmaz 2006), in which analytical themes and categories emerge from the data rather than preconceived hypotheses. The study draws on fifteen in-depth, semi-structured interviews carried out among the parents of transgender youths from two regions in Poland: the Pomeranian and Masovian voivodships.

The research was inspired by my own personal experiences facilitating support group meetings for trans persons, and for the families of trans persons, the latter of which consisted mainly of parents. However, regarding the confidential nature of these meetings, none of the original data was used for the purpose of this research project.

The research participants were recruited through the snowball sampling technique. The first set of interviews were conducted with two mothers who worked as volunteers in their local LGBTQ+ community, while other parents were contacted through a chain of referrals. The research participants were recruited from parents who self-identified as being accepting of their children, as well as being supportive. The fifteen interviewees included ten mothers (nine birthmothers and one stepmother) and five fathers (all birth fathers). Among the interviewees were two couples, thus the fifteen research participants were parenting thirteen transgender youths. All of the parents were in their forties and fifties, while their transgender children were in their late teens to early twenties. The respondents were white and of Slavic origin, reflecting the ethnical homogeneity of Polish society. Nine interviewees had higher education, while six had secondary education. All of the parents were cisgender and heterosexual.

The interviews were conducted in Polish with selected citations translated into English. All of the interviewees were informed of the scope and purpose of the study and have provided an informed consent for their participation and the publication of the research outcomes. I have personally collected, recorded, and transcribed all of the interviews, due to the fact that many of the research participants would not have felt comfortable about third party access to the recordings. Each of the people interviewed was done so privately, individually, and without other family members being present. Having following the grounded theory approach when applying qualitative data analysis (Charmaz 2006), I used open coding as a basis for deriving axial and selective codes in order "to make

comparisons and to identify any patterns” (Gibbs & Taylor 2010). It was a cross-case analysis. The names of the respondents have been changed.

Research Outcomes

Social Expectations and Questioning Parenting Skills

Although the interviewed parents had a tendency to focus more on their children’s experiences rather than their own, the outcomes clearly indicate that not only did transgender individuals experience societal oppression, but that the parents of trans youths also endured such oppression. In particular, their parenting skills are constantly being questioned by people in the social environment in which they live, deriving from multiple sources, such as distant family members, teachers, and school counselors.

Among the respondents, this was experienced particularly by the mothers, possibly deriving from the cultural assumption that they are commonly depicted as being the primary caregivers, and therefore responsible for a child’s “proper” upbringing, including the socialization of traditional gender roles.

You know, when they [people] think that there is something wrong with a child they always say “how did the mother raise you.” No one ever says “how did the father raise you”... [Marzena, mother of a non-binary teenage trans person]

Thus, those respondents who were fathers were less likely to care about the opinions of third parties. Whereas respondents who were mothers were prone to self-accusation, in part due to the judgmental attitude exhibited by people in the surrounding social environment. They often found themselves “searching for reasons” for their child’s gender identity being different than the assumed norms of society’s expectations.

When I was pregnant, I wanted to keep on working and was always on the move. That was too much. And then... and one day I started bleeding and then got those pills to prevent the miscarriage. (...) I think this [the pills] has messed up my hormones. [Katarzyna, mother of a trans masculine person in early 20s]

This mind-set was prevalent among single mothers who had brought up their children without a male partner. Barbara and Jolanta, both single mothers of teenage trans men, attempted to give explanations for their children’s identities, which they believed was due to the absence of a father figure, and their self-perceived failure in providing their children with the “proper” gender socialization. Interestingly, while Barbara highlighted her child’s longing for masculinity, Jolanta focused on her child’s rejection of femininity.

*She*¹ has been brought up without a father. You see, we got divorced when she* was only three... I guess she’s* always missed the father figure, that male figure in the family... that’s why she* wants this masculinity so much. [Barbara, mother of a teenage trans man]*

His father was abusive and left us when Marek was still very little. (...) He [Marek] could see that it’s always been hard for me, that I would always struggle. (...) So he could see that everything was on my shoulders, and

¹ Although the adolescent child uses male pronouns, the mother uses female pronouns while talking about her child. All gender pronouns misused by the parents are marked with an *.

I would always complain about how hard it is for me. So maybe he would think that it is like that when you are a woman, didn't want it for himself (...). So he rejected the femininity, didn't want to be a woman. [Jolanta, mother of a teenage trans man]

It is worth noting that while all of the fathers who participated in the research had the full cooperation and support of their female partners in relation to their child's transitioning, only two of the mothers had the same level of cooperation and support from their male partners. Five mothers in relationships with their children's fathers, reported that their male partners had to some extent retreated from all aspects of their child's transitioning since their coming-out, leaving such issues entirely in the domain of the mother. At the same time, the fathers of families which had more than one child, continued to engage in their other children's lives. Two of the mothers had long been single parents before they learned of their child's gender identity, while one mother even reported that her husband abandoned their family shortly after their only child had come out as a transgender woman.

Responses to the Social Expectations

All of the interviewed parents expressed concerns regarding the upbringing of a trans child in a conservative society:

[Even though] I know it's not gonna happen, yet I still hope this will turn out to be just a phase... I'm not unaccepting—I'm just concerned. You know what people are like—what kind of life will he have? [Jerzy, father of a teenage trans woman]*

Due to what would be an openly hostile social environment, some parents even considered moving as an option for their children.

I support Łucja in her plans to move to Cracow, to her friends. I will help her financially. So that she could be happy, because here she won't be. Because there are so many people here and someone may always say something cruel, mention something... And I can see that it's no good for her, to listen to such things. [Danuta, mother of a trans woman in early 20s]

They also worried about the reaction of other family members when faced with social gatherings such as weddings, funerals, or christenings. On such occasions, they insisted on their children *acting out* their rejected birth gender, rather their experienced gender. They explained such restrictions were the result of traditional societal expectations, and not because of any unacceptance on their part. They believed they were saving their child from any unnecessary stress, having evidently assumed that their children found such *performances* to be less traumatic than having to deal with the reaction of other family members.

These attitudes usually pertained to distant family members, although there were a few parents who decided to conceal their child's experienced gender from their grandparents, justifying such decisions in terms of the elder generation lacking the ability to understand gender incongruence. Some even suggested such revelations might affect the grandparents' health, such as: *This would give grandma a heart attack!* [Barbara, mother of a teenage trans man] One mother even went as far as to stop their child from having any further contact with their grandparents, rather than informing them of their grandchild's experienced gender identity.

Parents who had other younger children, worried how they were going to tell them about their older sibling's gender identity. Many parents expressed doubts whether such information might cause confusion in the younger children's comprehension of gender roles, and whether it might influence their own gender identity. Parents also claimed they were worried their younger children might freely share their sibling's identity with people outside of the family. They said such a decision must come from their transgender child, and not be taken out of their hands by their younger siblings.

Personal Emotions and Feelings

In the interviews, parents also discussed their attitudes towards their children's transitioning. While acceptance and support of the social aspect of the transition was easier to deal with, for many the medical aspects were of far more concern. On the one hand, they understood that their children needed to undergo certain medical procedures. On the other hand, they had strong objections concerning the influences such physical changes would have, in particular, the irreversibility of the procedures.

Also, among parents who had accepted the inevitability of the medical transition, fathers focused more on gathering relevant information and undertaking the necessary steps in helping their children accomplish transitioning. However, mothers were much more likely to reflect on whether their children had made the right decisions and expressed far more doubts. Three of the mothers, although having given the "green light" to start the medical transition once their children reached eighteen years of age, simultaneously declared they would not be able to be a part of it in any other way.

It's hard to explain, I want to support him and I've accepted this [transition]. But I can't support this [hormone therapy and surgeries] financially. Not that I can't afford it, I can... but I just can't do that... it's really hard to explain, it's too hard... [Grażyna, mother of a trans man in early 20s]

I gave birth to a healthy daughter, and she wants to turn herself into... a mutilated man. I know that's what she* needs to do, (...) but it breaks my heart. [Eugenia, mother of a teenage trans man]*

An emotionally important subject brought up by many parents was being able to participate in choosing their child's new (coherent with the experienced gender) name. Excluding them from the process was for many the same as being pushed aside, especially if the parents later discovered their children had consulted other people (e.g. friends) in this matter. By removing this possibility for participation, parents felt that they were being undermined, and that the significance of their roles were being reduced or even removed.

He didn't even consult it with us when choosing his new name. We named him when he was born, parents always do that. But he didn't let us choose the new name, just informed us one day to call him Feliks from now on. I don't even like this name: why Feliks? (...) He should have asked me. I felt left out... [Grażyna, mother of a trans man in early 20s]

For some parents, choosing a new name also had a symbolic meaning:

This [choosing a name] helped us somehow to say goodbye to our son, you know, and welcome our daughter... [Beata, mother of a trans woman in early 20s]

Parents also complained how their children lacked understanding for their stances, while at the same time they were being expected to show immediate comprehension. The research participants related mainly to the usage of appropriate pronouns and other grammatical forms such as Polish language nouns, verbs, adjectives, and numeral forms expressing gender.

It also takes them [transgender adolescents] much time to come into terms with themselves. So they can't expect that we [parents] will immediately understand everything. I've been using the female form for 17 years, it's hard to change it just like that, to get used to... But she doesn't understand it (...), she's* so impatient. [Eugenia, mother of a teenage trans man]*

The parents highlighted the fact their generation had been raised under a communist regime, which often meant they had had little or no access to the kind of information available to contemporary society beyond their borders. Therefore it was difficult overcoming the traditional concepts of gender when trying to understand their children's transgender identities. According to most parents, they were doing their best to understand and support their children. Yet they declared that they should be afforded more patience whenever they made a mistake. Too often their *faux pas* had been wrongly interpreted as being malicious. They emphasised how much they wanted to be regarded as an ally, and that the more lenient and upfront their children were, the less anxiety and anguish they would feel as parents. They believed this would place them in a much better position to figure out how to support their children.

There were also a few parents who failed to recognize they weren't meeting their children's expectations, which otherwise might have enabled a more effective form of communication with them. One such understatement was a complaint made by Barbara, who, like some of the other parents, didn't recognize that using the appropriate pronoun might have accelerated communication with her son:

I want to understand all of this, but she would never talk to me. [Barbara, mother of a teenage trans man]*

In regards to parents whose transgender children experienced their gender within the binary concept of male and female, they declared that they were finally coming to understand their children's identities, whereas the parents of non-binary or gender fluid youths, found their children's identities difficult to comprehend. The latter group complained of severe difficulties: avoiding gendered forms when speaking to their children (an endeavour hardly possible with the traditional usage of the Polish language); or—since the children also found it challenging to avoid using gendered forms—alternating between male and female linguistic forms (which many non-binary Polish speakers choose to do).

Another issue related to how parents felt, was their attitude towards specific legal practices in regards to gender recognition. In Poland, to obtain legal gender recognition, one must first file a lawsuit against their parents; essentially they must enter into a civil law case². Although all of the parents understood their children were not responsible for instigating the process, or that they were being intentionally accused of having wrongly

² According to Article 156 of the Polish Criminal Code (ISAP 1997), genital surgeries such as phalloplasties or vaginoplasties can be performed only after a court has issued a positive verdict on one's gender recognition and the individual has been issued a new birth certificate and a new personal identification number. To secure

identified their children's gender at birth, nonetheless some parents found the whole process to be humiliating:

I know it's just a formality, but it's still bruising, (...) I understand this, but some other parents... if they are elderly people, they may not even understand. [Lucyna, mother of a trans woman in early 20s]

Evolving Attitudes Towards Their Children's Gender Identity

The majority of the interviewed parents claimed they didn't realize that their children were transgender or gender nonconforming until their coming-out. However, this was prevalent especially in case of those parents whose children were assigned female gender at birth. Their gender-nonconventional demeanor was often perceived as gender-neutral, sometimes even received with approval and characterized as "tough", "not being into the silly, girly stuff." At the same time, gender-nonconventional behavior in children assigned male at birth, was more likely to be noticed, often causing parental concern, however in most cases being rationalized as "unduly sensitive" or "having an artistic soul."

Once their children's gender identities came to their knowledge, the parents participating in my research seemed to have developed successive reactions to this situation, which can be structured into certain stages: 1) *disbelief*, 2) *denial*, 3) *regret*, 4) *reframing and reworking*, 5) *accepting and supporting*.

For many of the parents concerned, their initial reaction at their children's coming-out was one of

disbelief: I've seen this TV-show about... about transsexual persons. This had a huge impact on me. (...) They were born like this. And they've been abandoned by their families, they had to go through a lot! Terrible (...) I was literally crying. (...) So I was aware that such problem exists, but I would never admit this could be my problem too. [Teresa, mother of a trans man in early 20s]

Such disbelief was often a catalyst for complete *denial*, often followed by a strong desire to "talk them out of it."

[When asked if they use their child's preferred pronouns at home]: *I don't want to encourage her** [Grzegorz, father of a teenage trans man]

[Explaining how she used to think in the past]: *...I would see it as a rebellion, the peers' bad influence (...). The teens always rebel and do something destructive. Some years ago all of them would have eating disorders, now they are trans.* [Danuta, mother of a trans woman in early 20s]

And later they exhibited *regret*:

As a mother, I gave birth to a son... [Danuta, mother of a trans woman in early 20s]

this court ruling, individuals must file a lawsuit against their parents to meet Article 189 of the Polish Criminal Code (Klonkowska 2015; for more information on Polish legal regulations in this context, see: Śledzińska-Simon 2013; Olczyk 2014). An act, aimed at modifying and regulating gender recognition in Poland, was processed by the Polish Parliament between 2012 and 2015, and subsequently passed. The presidential veto, however, together with further non-action from the Parliament, ceased policy work on this particular legal proposal (Klonkowska, Dynarski 2020).

I used to have this regret, that I will not have grandchildren. I mean, my „own” grandchildren. That Edward will never have a child that would be „his flesh and bone.” [Teresa, mother of a trans man in early 20s]

Consequently, there would occur a process of *reframing and reworking* by the parents in regards to their original standpoints, until finally *accepting and supporting* their children:

I know that’s the person she really is, that’s the person she’s always been, I just couldn’t see it. Or maybe I didn’t want to see it, because I was so scared for her. (...) I’m happy, if she is happy. And I can see that she is happy now. [Lucyna, mother of a trans woman in early 20s]

For some parents this change in attitude has emotionally impacted on their lives much harder than anticipated:

It’s never been easy, still isn’t. I don’t know whether it will ever be... [Danuta, mother of a trans woman in early 20s]

The reaction from parents in the past had been to reject their children when coming out—previously relatively frequent—but at present it has become much rarer in Poland. Among the parents interviewed, none of them would ever have considered such a response. More and more parents are increasingly changing their world-view rather than rejecting their children.

She has turned my world upside down. But I would never turn my back on my child. (...) her happiness is all I want. [Zbigniew, father of a teenage trans woman]

Some of the Polish parents of transgender youths go further in their convictions, and become activists, supporting not only their own children, but advocating rights for all trans individuals. This was the attitude of two mothers among the interviewees.

Discussion

Although the parents who participated in my research were accepting and supportive of their children, some of the interviewees’ responses might seem to be incoherent with their self-identification as accepting parents—e.g. Eugenia’s perception of her child’s gender affirming surgery as mutilation, or Grzegorz’s reluctance to use the right pronouns. However, these reactions don’t indicate the parents’ lack of sensibility about their transitioning children. These reactions evince the interviewees evolution over time, and their initial fears about their children’s future. They show the path that most parents follow to finally better understand and embrace their gender diverse children: from a reaction of *disbelief*, through *denial*, *regret*, *reframing and reworking* to an attitude of *accepting and supporting*.

Also, the parents’ narratives were strongly rooted in the binary concepts of gender. In their conceptualization of their children’s identities, traditional notions of gender remained a primary frame (Ridgeway 2011). As a consequence, even when they found binary transgender identities comprehensible, non-binary or gender fluid identities seemed intangible to them. For similar reasons the parents expressed concerns about how the transgender identity of their child might influence their younger siblings.

When referred to the outcomes of previous research regarding parents of transgender youth, a few additional observations are to be made.

Meadow (2011) reports as follows:

most of my research subjects, if not all of them, labored internally for some time to comprehend why their child's internal emotional life falls so at odds with the role they seemed destined to fill. And this is labor demanded from them by the social institutions with which they come into routine contact, schools, religious institutions, the state. (Meadow 2011: 731).

In my study—probably because this kind of knowledge was not expected from them, but entrusted to “expert discourse”—not all parents felt coerced to comprehend this, explaining that:

Doctors and scientists still don't know why some people are like that [Marian, father of a non-binary teenage trans person].

However, those who did—similar to the participants in Meadow's (2011) study—referred to biological and psychological reasons, and sometimes (i.e. in the case of a few mothers) blamed themselves for their children's “failure” in meeting societal expectations. Surprisingly, none of the respondents suggested spiritual based explanations (Meadow 2011) for their children's gender identity. With Poland being a highly religious country, such explanations might seem quite probable. Yet, spiritual life for many Polish people is equated with religious life, and the religious makeup of Poland is almost monopolized by the Catholic Church—promoting gender essentialism and highly critical attitudes towards gender and sexual minorities. Therefore, spiritual accounts, unlike in Meadow's study, were not mentioned by any of my respondents.

Kristy N. Ryan (2016) made a distinction between “gender-expansive” and “gender-subversive” mothers of gender-diverse children, where “gender-expansive” mothers are “prompted, and sometimes pushed, into adopting trans-affirming understandings of gender in response to their child's persistent, insistent and consistent articulations that their assigned gender did not align with their sense of self” (p. 7) and “self-identify as having come a long way in their understandings of gender as a result of parenting their gender-diverse child” (p. 7), while “gender-subversive” mothers “report having challenged dominant gender ideology in their personal or professional lives before having children, self-identify as having set out to intentionally disrupt hegemonic gender norms through their parenting” (p. 12). All parents participating in my study undoubtedly adhered to the “gender-expansive” category.

Rahilly (2015) analyses three practices applied by parents of transgender children: “gender hedging”—defined as “parents' creative efforts to curb their child's nonconformity and stay within gender-normative constraints” (p. 347); “gender literacy”—when parents try to resist gender truth regime (p. 350); and “playing along”—when parents, who challenge the gender truth regime, “also feel that not every instance is appropriate for, or receptive to, such explicit deconstructionist efforts” (p. 352). Similarly, K. Ryan (2018) identifies four aspects of the family transition, based on transgender youths' mothers' attitudes: “playing to the primary frame”—when the essentialist concept of gender “acts as a powerful organizing force” (p. 90); “mandate juggling”—which allows mothers to “communicate

personal support for their children's gender preferences while still enforcing a measure of gender normativity" (p. 80); "constructing alternate beliefs" — which results in expanding gender possibilities for their children (p. 68); and "bringing dad along"—when mothers aim to "disseminate their newfound knowledge to other family members, beginning with their child's father or coparent" (p. 84). Coming from the "playing to the primary frame" stance in their initial reactions of *disbelief* and *denial*; moving on to "mandate juggling" or the practice of "gender hedging" during the *regret phase*—the parents in my study would finally begin "constructing alternate beliefs" in the eye-opening process of *reframing and reworking* their previous stances, to finally *accept and support* their children's gender identities. At this stage they displayed both: "gender literacy" and "playing along" practices.

Although, and probably due to the inclusion of fathers among my research participants, the "bringing dad along" aspect of family transition differed slightly from the outcomes in the aforementioned K. Ryan's (2018) study. Three of the mothers in my research were single parents, and seven were living in relationships with the children's fathers. Six out of those seven mothers were indeed the *spiritus movens* trying to "bring dad along," even though at the time of the interview only two mothers already had their male partner's full support and engagement. The one mother, who, unlike others, had been "brought along" by her husband, was a stepmother. This latter situation can be explained by the fact that she was not the child's biological mother, although she joined the family before the teenage child came out. Surprisingly, there were two other fathers among the research participants who also "brought along" their female partners; the children's biological mothers. According to the fathers, they had been the ones who had initiated undertaking certain steps in helping facilitate acceptance of their children's transgender identities and also offering them support, while noting that their wives needed to stop ruminating and that they had pushed them to move beyond the *denial* phase.

My respondents also confirmed K. Ryan's (2016, 2018) observations, that it was the mothers who were overwhelmingly responsible for the childcare labor in the family. Yet in my study there was an exception to this rule, a couple, where the biological father, and not the stepmother, was the primary caregiver. Although I can't draw any conclusions based on one case only, there might be a possibility that in this case biological parenthood came before any assumed female caregiving role. Thus, if childcare traditionally attributed to mothers was not only seen as an outcome of the social construction of the female gender role, but was also assigned because of the fact of giving birth to the child, this might go some way to explaining why in Ryan's study "Among lesbian couples, biological mothers take on more of the childrearing responsibilities than their non-biological parent partners" (K. Ryan 2016: 13).

Regardless of the mother's primary role in childrearing responsibilities, among my respondents the child's medical transition-related proceedings were taken care of either by the youths themselves, or with support from the parent who had been the first to move towards the acceptance stage.

Additionally, just like in K. Ryan's (2018: 76–77) and Rahilly's research (2015: 358), the interviewed parents were more likely to discover behavior and preferences traditionally recognized as female in youths (or even earlier in little children) assigned male gender at birth, rather than behavior and preferences socially acknowledged as masculine in the

case of youths assigned female at birth. “Feminine boys” would also cause more parental concern, while tomboyish behavior in “girls” was received with less regard, or even a small amount of approval (compare: K. Ryan 2018: 77).

Conclusions

The interviews with the Polish parents of transgender youths undoubtedly indicate that while a child transitions—whether it’s a social or medical transition—the whole family undergoes a transition as well. The process of negotiating gender identities and opposing people in a hostile social environment seems to be difficult not only for transgender youths, but—to a large extent—also their parents.

The parents express angst related to their children’s future, fearing social and extended family reactions and have significant concerns regarding raising a transgender youth under current political circumstances and social attitudes towards LGBTQ+ persons in Poland.

At the same time parents’ emotions are also strongly related to their inability in fully understanding their children, especially if their identities are beyond the binary (trans) male—(trans) female dichotomy. A lack of comprehension along with experienced difficulties in communication with their children causes additional concerns.

Even though none of the interviewed mothers and fathers has ever “set out to intentionally disrupt hegemonic gender norms through their parenting” (K. Ryan 2016: 12) prior to their children’s coming out, the parents went through consecutive stages that have emerged from this study: *disbelief*, *denial* and *regret*, until finally initiating a process of *reframing and reworking* their stances to *accept and support* their children’s gender identities.

The parents who were accepting became trans-supportive parents. However, unlike in US-based research outcomes (e.g. Meadow 2011, 2018; Rahilly 2015; K. Ryan 2016, 2018) none of the interviewed mothers and fathers could be described as a trans-affirming parent: even two mothers who were actively engaged as volunteers and advocates for their local LGBTQ+ organizations, never questioned the gender binary as a primary frame.

The Polish parents of transgender youths struggle in many aspects. While doing their best to recognize their children’s best interest, they need a lot of support themselves, in order to successfully and fully support their kids.

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Biographical Note: Anna M. Klonowska (Ph.D.), Profesor at the Institute of Sociology, University of Gdansk. Author of many publications on the social situation of transgender people, the sociology of masculinity and the sociology of the body. Winner of the Chair in Transgender Studies Research Fellowship (The Transgender Archives) award; Founder and long-time leader (2010–2019) of the Tri-City support group for transgender people and groups for their relatives.

ORCID iD: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5065-4975>

E-mail: anna.klonowska@ug.edu.pl