

Intersectional perspectives of parents of transgender children in Aotearoa (New Zealand)

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ABSTRACT

Introduction: This article explores the intersectional perspectives of parents of transgender children in Aotearoa (New Zealand). The substantial body of research on parent experiences in this area has largely focused on parents who are white North American middle-class cisgender women. We seek to extend this research by taking an intersectional approach and examining the perspectives of a group of participants of different genders, sexual orientations, and cultural backgrounds.

Methods: We asked 20 participants in Aotearoa who self-identified as gender-affirming parents to draw their experience of parenting a transgender child and discuss this with us in interview.

Results: The research resulted in rich visual and verbal depictions of gender-affirming parenting, drawing from the intersectional perspectives of Māori, Pākehā, Pacific, Asian, queer, straight, female, male and non-binary parents. Using visual and verbal discourse analysis, we explore how the participants constructed their experience from their uniquely situated perspectives, both specific and multilayered.

Conclusion: We argue that the parents' perspectives reveal both challenges and strengths, reflecting the burdens of intersectional oppression, while also fostering the parents' capacity for engaging in discursive resistance to advance their children's interests.

KEYWORDS



Discourse; drawing; intersectionality; New Zealand; parenting; transgender children

Introduction

Family support is protective for transgender¹ young people, improving their wellbeing and increasing their resilience in facing challenges outside the home. Stigma, discrimination, and violence contribute to high levels of distress, but when a transgender young person feels supported by their family their mental health can be equal to that of cisgender youth (Pullen Sansfaçon et al., 2019, p. 3). Accordingly, it has been claimed that 'transgender children/youth demonstrate the best possibility for resilience and positive mental health when they are part of an affirming and supportive family and environment' (Aramburu Alegria, 2018, pp. 132–133). This connection

between family support and youth wellbeing forms the rationale for a substantial body of research on the experiences of parents of transgender children, with the goal of learning how to better support them in supporting their children.

Research on parents of transgender children has a long history, spanning health and the social sciences, and moving from a pathologising to an affirming approach (de Bres, 2022). The pathologising approach is evident in the way researchers report parent reactions of shock, guilt, shame, self-blame, regret, denial, and disbelief. Such parental reactions can be attributed to a child's gender or to societal cisgenderism. The earlier research tends toward the former, with

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researchers validating parents' negative emotions and failing to conceive of positive parental reactions (Field & Mattson, 2016; Gregor et al., 2015; Wren, 2002). This reflects the long research history of problematizing transgender experiences (Hill & Menvielle, 2009). Some recent research is affirming, relocating the problem from transgender children to the society surrounding them and focusing on parental resistance to oppression (de Bres, 2022). For example, Abreu et al. (2022) explore parental figures' reactions and coping strategies in relation to recent anti-transgender legislation in the USA, and Neary (2019) and Manning (2017) examine how middle-class mothers of transgender children mobilize their capital for broader social change. When reporting negative parental reactions, researchers now often refer to a social context of stigma. For example, Schlehofer et al. (2021, p. 2) attribute 'obstructive parenting practices' to 'societal pressure, stigma, and judgment [that] can make it difficult for some parents to support their [transgender] child'. There is a need for further research to highlight resistance and resilience (Galman, 2020), exploring how parents support their children in the face of oppression, and recognizing that raising a transgender child can be a joyful experience.

Research to date in this area has two key limitations: the marked geographical bias toward North America and the lack of diversity in participants, who are overwhelmingly white middle-class mothers. The geographical range of this research is now widening, with studies appearing in the past couple of years from Israel (Nadan, 2021; Tsfati, 2021), Italy (Frigerio et al., 2021), Japan (Ishii, 2018), Australia (Riggs & Bartholomaeus, 2018); Spain (Platero, 2014), Brazil (Seibel et al., 2018), Ireland (Neary, 2019), and India (Ghosh & Roy, 2022). While this geographical expansion is welcome, the participants largely remain middle-class mothers from majority ethnic groups. A similar scenario applies to research with transgender adults, de Vries and Sojka (2022, p. 97) noting that 'historically, much of the research and knowledge about trans people in the USA has been based on middle-class White trans people's experiences'. De Vries and Sojka observe that this is changing, with recent work being 'increasingly intersectional, addressing the

ways identities, social locations/positions (e.g. gender, race, ethnicity, social class, sexuality, nationality, age, and ability), and geopolitical place shape trans people's sense of self, experiences, and interactions with others' (2022, p.98). This is not yet the case in research with parents of transgender children.

The racial, class and gender profile of parents in studies to date reflects the population of people who access the gender clinics, queer organizations, and support groups from where participants are generally recruited. The relative absence of fathers is consistent with reports of lower engagement from fathers in supporting their child's transgender identity (Ishii, 2018; Manning, 2017; Neary, 2019; Ryan, 2018). Some research addresses the middle-class bias of the parent movement in this area, although this occurs *via* an analysis of middle-class parent advocacy (Manning, 2017; Neary, 2019). The dominance of white participants means the experiences of minoritised ethnic groups are missing. A related issue is that the researchers working with parents are often themselves members of majority cultural groups, which affects how they approach their research and analyze and report their results. This combination of researchers and participants results in an unrepresentative picture of parent experiences, which is particularly troubling given the realities of intersectional oppression (Manning, 2017) and variation in cultural norms regarding gender (Abreu et al., 2019).

For research to reflect the diverse realities of people parenting transgender children, we need to expand this picture. Regarding gender, it is important to hear more from fathers of transgender children, as well as parents of minoritised genders who are not women. Regarding sexuality, more work is required on the experiences of queer parents (Kovalanka et al., 2018). Regarding class, studies of working-class parents are needed. Regarding ethnicity, studies must include people of color and Indigenous people who experience the intergenerational trauma resulting from colonization (Kerekere, 2017). Such research requires an intersectional approach to analysis, looking at the complexities of navigating transgender identity as it intersects with race and class (Manning, 2017).

Our research is one of the first to explore the experiences of parents of transgender children in Aotearoa (New Zealand).² We sought to build on previous research by purposefully recruiting participants of diverse social and cultural backgrounds and examining parental resistance in the face of oppression. This article examines the intersectional perspectives of the parents we spoke to. We start by surveying previous research on the experiences of parents of transgender children from a discourse perspective, identifying what has been found to date in terms of intersectional experiences. Next, we describe the intersectional approach and method we used for our research, in which we asked twenty gender-affirming parents of diverse social and cultural backgrounds to draw their experience of parenting a transgender child and analyzed their drawings and words using multimodal discourse analysis. We present our results from the unique perspectives of participants of different genders, sexual orientations, and cultural backgrounds. We consider how these perspectives influenced the participants' construction of their experience, both in terms of the specific lenses they bring to this experience and how the multiple layers of their perspectives interconnect. We argue that these perspectives reveal both challenges and strengths: reflecting the burdens of intersectional oppression, while also fostering the parents' capacity for engaging in discursive resistance to advance their children's interests.

Discourses about transgender children

Although research on parent experiences exhibits the white, female, straight and middle-class bias noted above, there is some evidence that parent experiences vary based on features of their personal identity. We highlight some relevant findings in this section, focusing on how parents of different social and cultural backgrounds are variably impacted by dominant discourses about transgender children.

As critical discourse analysts (van Leeuwen, 2006, van Dijk, 2006), our central concern is how discourse is used to reproduce or challenge social inequalities. We understand discourse as a point of view on the world expressed *via* language (and other semiotic resources, such as images).

Discourses gain momentum as they are spread from person to person, and those that rise to dominance exert immense power over how societies are organized. They often become so pervasive that they are taken to be 'common sense' and individuals may be unaware of the socially and historically situated processes underlying them. In this way, discourses 'naturalise' relations between language and social order' (Philips, 1998, p. 217), 'masking the social construction processes at work' (Boudreau & Dubois, 2007, p. 104). Even dominant discourses remain subject to contestation, however, with counter-discourses regularly arising to challenge them (Briggs, 1998). Being constructed in the interest of specific social groups, discourses can be used as strategic resources to pursue, exercise or maintain power (Woolard, 1998).

Parents encounter dominant social discourses about transgender children in dealings with extended family, friends, schools, medical professionals, and their wider communities. These discourses frame transgender as pathology (e.g. *via* a diagnosis of gender dysphoria), reduce gender to biology, and binarise genders to include only female and male. They reflect a cisgenderist perspective that values cisgender experience over transgender experience (Bull & D'Arrigo-Patrick, 2018, p. 173). Within this perspective, parents are often blamed for their child's gender (Galman, 2020; Johnson & Benson, 2014; Manning, 2017). This is grounded in a traditional Western clinical approach that attributed a child's transgender identity to parental flaws, such as an over-involved mother or absent father (Manning, 2017). Such dominant discourses subject parents to secondary stigma (Johnson & Benson, 2014; Tsfat, 2021), impacting their social networks and their ability to access support (Abreu et al., 2019). Hidalgo and Chen (2019) argue that, upon encountering sustained stigma, parents can experience gender minority stress paralleling that of their child, which has flow-on impacts for parents' ability to support their children. These discourses impact parents in different ways. Mothers are more likely to be subjected to parental blame than fathers (Johnson & Benson, 2014) and queer parents face increased scrutiny of their parenting, based on the misconception that they cannot serve as

adequate gender role models for their children (Kovalanka et al., 2018). In relation to race and class, Meadow (2018) found that white middle-class parents in the USA were likely to view the state as a source of potential protection for their transgender children, while Black and working-class parents were likely to view it as a threat.

Research shows parents responding to dominant discourses in a range of ways, sometimes reproducing them and sometimes constructing counter-discourses of gender affirmation. The gender of parent and child have been shown to be determining factors in whether parents internalize or resist cisgenderist discourses. Several studies note the more punitive reactions of parents, especially fathers, toward transgender girls (Meadow, 2018; Ryan, 2018; Spivey et al., 2018) and the need for transgender boys to explicitly assert their gender for it to be noticed by their parents, in a social context of hegemonic masculinity (Meadow, 2018). Under the pressure of sexist discourses of mother-blaming, mothers may express heightened self-doubt in relation to supporting their transgender child compared to fathers (Johnson & Benson, 2014). Queer parents may find their own queer-ness impacts on how they support their queer children in conflicting ways. Drawing on familiar discourses of queer pride and resistance may help these parents to accept their children's gender and advocate for their rights (Field & Mattson, 2016; Kovalanka et al., 2018), but queer parents' own prior experiences of homophobia may make them more cautious in accepting their child's gender, out of fear that their child may suffer in similar ways or that they will be blamed for having somehow influenced their child to become transgender (Kovalanka et al., 2018). Some of these discourses also came up among our participants, as we will discuss after describing the intersectional approach we used for our research.

Intersectionality

In the context of research that has prioritized the experiences of a restricted range of parents, often undertaken by researchers who are themselves members of socially privileged groups, it was very important for us to take an

intersectional approach that would incorporate the multilayered experiences of a wider range of parents.

Intersectional approaches to research are critical in nature, seeking to explore how power is implicated in people's life experiences at multiple levels and 'how people are simultaneously positioned—and position themselves—in multiple categories, such as gender, class, and ethnicity' (Christensen & Jensen, 2012, p. 110). This involves recognizing that people's experiences are structured by intersecting forms of oppression and privilege, which must be seen in connection rather than in isolation (Wyatt et al., 2022).

The term intersectionality was coined by Black feminist theorists in the USA (Crenshaw, 1989), but similar principles have long existed within Indigenous knowledge frameworks and research practices, including Kaupapa Māori approaches in Aotearoa (Smith, 2021) and among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders (Moreton-Robinson, 2000) and North American Indigenous peoples (Clark, 2016). Such approaches have a holistic understanding of people as complex beings, intimately connected to each other and their environment (Clark, 2016; Olsen, 2018). Indeed, the idea of viewing a person through one facet of their identity is foreign to an Indigenous world view (Clark, 2016). Aotearoa researcher Elizabeth Kerekere underlines this point, noting that in te ao Māori (the Māori world view) a takatāpui (Māori queer) identity is not conceptualized as an intersection of different identity categories—ethnicity, gender and sexuality – but as one identity category within which these features cannot be disentangled:

Takatāpui is not an intersection of where Māori identity meets sexual orientation and gender identity or diverse bodies at a given point. Such a viewpoint would suggest that 'Māori' is inherently heterosexual and cis-gendered. Rather, this study asserts takatāpui are a 'subset' of their whānau [family], hapū [sub-tribe] and iwi [tribe]; that being diverse is part of being Māori. (Kerekere, 2017, p. 46)

While there are complexities in blending Western and Indigenous terms and approaches (Olsen, 2018), Intersectionality remains a useful concept in considering the lived experience of

takatāpui, who often experience multiple forms of oppression—racism, homophobia, and transphobia, all of which are based on features of identity, and which intersect:

Although takatāpui share the racism experienced by other Māori, they also encounter the homophobia, biphobia and transphobia faced by other members of Rainbow communities. Intersectionality provides insight into how that manifests for takatāpui, particularly when that discrimination comes from within the whānau. (Kerekere, 2017, p. 45)

This is further complicated by the historical context and ongoing effects of colonization in Aotearoa, where, as elsewhere, colonization took intersectional forms:

Colonial processes were not only gendered, they also attacked the other intersectional ways of being within Indigenous communities, including the complimentary roles of women and also the sacredness of Two-Spirit Indigenous peoples. (Clark, 2016, p. 51)

Colonization is thus inherently intersectional, which has particular relevance for Māori parents of transgender children in Aotearoa.

Intersectionality is often associated with methodology, but it is best conceptualized as a project-wide approach (Abrams et al., 2020). This includes undertaking research with the explicit aim of advancing social justice, formulating critical research questions, forming diverse teams, being reflexive about one's own positionality as a researcher, engaging with relevant communities, recruiting diverse participants, using creative methods, and analyzing data from an intersectional perspective (Abrams et al., 2020). The essential element is that 'to do intersectionality justice, researchers must unequivocally orient to issues of power, positionality, and difference throughout their research processes' (Rice et al., 2019). We describe below the method we used for our research, including how we implemented an intersectional approach throughout.

Methodology

Although intersectionality is much discussed as a theoretical concept, there are few guidelines for implementing it practically (Christensen &

Jensen, 2012; Abrams et al., 2020). Rather than being seen as vague and hard to implement, this dynamism and versatility is a strength of intersectional research. An intersectional approach can be adapted to fit the research question and data, can involve many different methods, and can be applied to many different forms of social analysis (Christensen & Jensen, 2012; Rice et al., 2019).

Most research on the experiences of transgender children has used individual interviews. These have been in person, by phone, or *via* online chat and include semi-structured interviews, narrative interviews, and focus groups. Some studies incorporate creative elements to enhance the interview experience and access different data. Gregor et al. (2015) use photo elicitation, where parents are invited to share a favorite photograph, encouraging story-sharing with minimal guidance from the researcher. Galman (2020) takes a more expansive arts-based approach, asking transgender children to compile 'identity scrapbooks' featuring self-portraits and autobiographical art, and visiting them in their homes to interview them about their creations. Feminist researchers support the use of such creative and arts-based methods in intersectional research as a means of fostering methodological innovation (Mehrotra, 2022).

We employed the method of reflective drawing (Castellotti & Moore, 2009), asking parents to draw their experience of parenting a transgender child and discuss this in interview. Drawing has been a research method in the social sciences since the beginning of the twentieth century, in psychology, sociology, anthropology and education (Rose, 2016). The first author has used it in previous research involving minoritised groups, due to its effectiveness in eliciting the personal, imaginative, subjective, and emotional aspects of participants' experiences and allowing them to lead with their own story (de Bres, 2017; de Bres & Lovrits, 2021; Lovrits & de Bres, 2020).

We recruited twenty participants by posting an invitation on the online support group *New Zealand Parents and Guardians of Transgender and Gender-Diverse Children* (www.transgenderchildren.nz), of which the first author is a member. This group was selected as it is the only national group serving parents of transgender children in the

country. The group had 752 members at the time of data collection. As in most previous research, the parents in this group from which we recruited our participants report being accepting of their children's self-determined gender. This is a condition of entry into the group and all parents are screened by an administrator to ensure agreement to the group's kaupapa (principles). As this parental acceptance is self-reported, we do not know if the young people concerned would agree that their parents are accepting of their gender. The perspectives of transgender youth regarding familial support remain understudied in research (Bhattacharya et al., 2021). In addition, parental acceptance can encompass both supportive and unsupportive acts, as 'degrees of parental acceptance and rejection exist along two separate spectra and can, therefore, both be expressed by a parent' (Hidalgo et al., 2017, p. 181). Our focus on (self-reported) gender-affirming parents represents a limitation in terms of the diversity of perspectives among the participants but, although this does not reflect the full range of parent experiences, group members hold various views and are at varying stages of accepting their child's gender.

The support group is mainly comprised of mothers, members being 85% female, 13% male, and 2% other gender at the time of data collection. While the group does not collect data on ethnicity, Pākehā (New Zealand Europeans, the dominant cultural group in Aotearoa) are numerically dominant. The group was started by Pākehā mothers and members often find the group *via* existing members. While the group attempts to be culturally inclusive, for example recruiting moderators to support Pacific and Māori parents, in practice it appears to primarily serve Pākehā parents. This reproduces a pattern observed throughout queer support organizations in Aotearoa, which are often viewed by queer people of color as primarily white spaces. It also echoes the dominance of white middle-class mothers in the parent advocacy movement in other Western countries (Neary, 2019, Manning, 2017).

The group's gender and ethnic profile was reflected in the participants who responded to the invitation to take part, all eighteen of whom were Pākehā mothers, apart from one Pākehā

non-binary parent. We were not willing to proceed with only Pākehā participants and no fathers so, after selecting ten participants from our original respondents using an online random number generator, we went out of our way to seek participants of other cultural and gender backgrounds for the remaining ten participants. Our approach was to invite active members on the group (three Pākehā fathers, two Māori mothers and one Pacific mother), to ask members of the group if their partners might be interested in being interviewed (reaching two Māori mothers) and to make a post on the group specifically seeking Pacific and Asian parents (reaching one Asian mother, one Asian father, and one Pacific father). All the people we contacted enthusiastically agreed to participate. We included one further participant who was born in Europe (but who we have classified as Pākehā for the purpose of this project to preserve anonymity). The final participants comprised four Māori, two Pacific, one Māori/Pacific, two Asian, and eleven Pākehā parents. Fourteen were mothers, five fathers, and one a non-binary parent. Participants were not asked about their sexual orientation, but it became clear during the interviews that members of sexual minority groups were over-represented in the participants, with at least seven of the twenty not identifying as heterosexual. The participants' children comprised eight transgender girls, eight transgender boys, and three non-binary children. Seven of the children were Māori, two Pacific, one Māori/Pacific, one Asian, and seven Pākehā, aged from 6 to 18.³

The interviews took place at the participants' preferred location, including their home, their workplace, a public space, the interviewer's home, or on zoom. The interviewer (the first author) asked them to 'draw your experience of parenting a gender-diverse⁴ child', which usually took about five minutes. They were then invited to talk about their drawing and asked follow-up questions to build on their description and explore visual features of interest. The interviewer and participants negotiated the meanings of the drawings in interaction, developing shared interpretations by connecting the visual elements of the drawings to the participants' verbal descriptions. This ensured we captured what the participants had intended

to convey in their drawings. When discussion of the drawing was exhausted, further topics were introduced, relating to the participant's experiences in family, educational and medical contexts, eliciting discourses across the interview. When the interview ended, participants were shown other parents' pictures (with prior permission), and many pointed out connections they could see between their own drawings and others', which assisted our analysis. The interviews averaged 73 min (ranging from 56 to 102). All participants received a voucher to acknowledge their contribution to the research.

Despite traditional claims to objectivity within the social sciences, the subjectivity of researchers is increasingly recognized. This is particularly evident with interactive methods such as interviews, where the identities of interviewer and interviewee are negotiated across the interview. When the topic of the research is parents of transgender children, the gender of both interviewer and interviewee will be especially salient, among other aspects of identity, such as age, parent status, ethnicity, professional role, etc. The first author and interviewer is a Pākehā cisgender parent of a transgender child and her in-group identity as a fellow parent influenced the interviews in multifarious ways. One positive effect was the rapport of shared lived experience and interactions through the group. The second author and research assistant is a takatāpui transgender person and, while they did not conduct interviews, their perspectives were essential in interpreting the data. This interaction between cisgender/transgender researchers with experience as a parent of a transgender child/former transgender child was central to the data analysis, comprising discussion, separate interview notes, and making drawings of our own experiences. Alongside the features mentioned above, the authors have further aspects of identity relevant to the topic of this article. The first author is queer and disabled, and the second author is whaikaha (disabled) and whaitakiwātanga (autistic). Our own experiences of intersectional oppression facilitated empathy with the participants and helped us better understand the complexity of their experiences.

Our multimodal discourse analysis focused on both the visual discourses in the drawings and the verbal discourses in the interviews, especially where they overlapped. Discourse analysis is often associated with verbal data, but the same approach can be applied to visual images. We started with the drawings, following the steps in the interpretive process proposed by Rose (2016) for Foucauldian visual discourse analysis, which involve identifying the strategies used to 'visually and verbally assert the truth of a particular discursive claim' (p. 214). These steps comprise: paying detailed attention to the images (e.g. composition, color, size); identifying themes in the form of recurring visual features; noting techniques of persuasion; attending to complexity and contradictions that orient to multiple discourses; and recognizing what is and is not included. We then followed the recommendations from intersectionality scholars for analyzing data from an intersectional perspective set out below:

- *Examine inequities not identities*: focus on sources of oppression rather than on features of identity (Abrams et al., 2020);
- *Proceed without assumptions*: do not assume the social categories that will be relevant, but remain open to which differences matter in a given situation (Rice et al., 2019);
- *Examine relevant social categories*: analyze each structural inequality separately before looking at how they connect (Wyatt et al., 2022);
- *'Ask the other question'*: go on to explore other facets of inequality that might be relevant (Davis, 2014);
- *Look under the surface*: go beyond the semantic level of what people say to identify what lies beneath their construction of their experience (Abrams et al., 2020); and
- *Take a both/and approach*: attend to the micro level of lived experience as well as the macro level of the social context and associated systems of privilege and oppression (Wyatt et al., 2022).

As discourse analysts, our approach to intersectionality is discourse-based. This means that we orient to intersectional oppression when our

participants do, starting from what they tell us is relevant to them and treating social categories and their intersections as emergent (Christensen & Jensen, 2012). We do not assume an intersection of social categories to be relevant to our participants unless they raise it themselves. This approach risks leaving out implicit elements of which participants may be unaware or which they do not wish to talk about. For example, a participant will likely be influenced by their cultural background even if they do not state this in interview or they may even have reasons for not talking about this in an interview context. This approach nevertheless makes sense for our research topic, given our interest in discursive resistance. We wanted to understand how our participants use discourse to advance social change, so we needed to see how they discussed their perspectives in interaction – with us and likely others. We also wanted to see what participants framed as most relevant to them, thereby promoting participant agency in constructing their experiences, right down to the level of having our participants lead the interview with a verbal description of their visual depiction of their experience.

Results

In this section, we analyze how our participants of different genders, sexual orientations, and cultural backgrounds drew on their unique perspectives in discursively constructing their experience of parenting a transgender child. In describing these perspectives, we use both the visual elements of the drawings and the verbal elements of the descriptions the participants made of these drawings, alongside verbal discourses the participants expressed across the rest of the interviews. The participants had much in common in terms of gender-affirming discourses, which we discuss in detail elsewhere (de Bres & Morrison-Young, 2023). These included discourses of resisting transphobia, personal transformation, shifting gender ideologies, normalization, unconditional love, child-led parenting, and protection. These discourses reflect the participants' belonging to a shared social category—all were facing transphobia directed toward their child. But the

participants were not only facing transphobia—they were also facing other forms of oppression. We focus here on what our participants told us of their experiences of racism, sexism and queerphobia, and how these intersected with their experiences of transphobia. We will do so by focusing on the discourses of a selection of participants, as well as making connections to the related discourses of the broader group.

Challenges and strengths

Ollie, a Māori queer woman, drew a heart-shaped koru (fern frond) at the center of the page, with two larger outer fronds and three smaller fronds within, and a large rainbow surrounding the koru (Figure 1).

The koru represents the two parents '*working together as a team*', surrounding, supporting and protecting their three children. Ollie related this to the symbolism of the harakeke (flax) within te ao Māori, the outer layers (the parents) protecting the young shoots (the children) within. The Māori imagery of the koru also connected to the support and protection of their iwi (tribe) who had always supported her trans child and seen him for who he was ('*he has never been misgendered on a marae [traditional Māori meeting place]*'), whereas transphobia had always come to them from the Pākehā world ('*it's only in Pākehā environments that there are any issues*'). Ollie described the rainbow as representing the support that the family had found within the queer community—'*finding the support groups and finding the people who will help, because there are so many who won't, so finding that community, finding that village*'. The drawing therefore depicts an overall theme of protection of the



Figure 1. Ollie's drawing.

children by the parents, as well as by their iwi and the queer community around them. Ollie concluded her description of her drawing by saying *‘these kids are my kids—and they will be protected.’*

While Ollie did not draw the storm clouds many others drew, she presented her rainbow as being in dialogic relationship to them, observing that *‘rainbows can be really happy and helpful, but also you can’t have a rainbow without storms.’* Ollie described a traumatic experience she attributed to a combination of sexism, racism and homophobia. She had been investigated by child social services, based on someone reporting her raising her child as transgender. The officials arrived unannounced at her home using her child’s former name and pronouns, who was traumatized as a result and *‘went back to pretending to be a girl for two weeks.’* She felt personally targeted for supposedly *‘forcing’* her child to be a boy. As she put it – *‘Māori queer woman—that’s why I was being targeted, not my husband, wasn’t it?’* Despite her commitment to protect her child, so vividly depicted in her drawing, she remained fearful of the prevailing political context in relation to transgender people: *‘I truly do want to have a happy view but... I don’t know, maybe that is being grown up Māori and poor and queer...you can’t trust.’* She described several life experiences of her own involving racism, sexism and homophobia. These forms of intersectional oppression were counter-balanced by the strength she drew from her feminist perspective as a woman, her Māori cultural identity, and her queer pride, which emboldened her to understand and wholeheartedly support her child: *‘I’ve been ostracized and excluded [...] I’ve got that knowledge of how it feels like to be confused about how yourself fits into society.’* This combination of challenges and strengths reflects the overall pattern that we identified in approaching the data from an intersectional perspective, as we discuss in the further examples below.

Rethinking gender roles

Many of the participants were women in relationships with men, and in their discourse we often heard the impact of dominant gendered

expectations on mothers. Parents are often blamed for having somehow influenced their child’s transgender identity, but this blame is more strongly directed toward mothers, who suffer the ‘secondary stigma of mothering a transgender child’ (Johnson & Benson, 2014, p. 124). We heard experiences of mother blaming from several mothers we interviewed, who felt they were targeted more than their male partners, including from other mothers and even children. One participant said a child approached her after school, saying *‘oh you’re that bad mummy’ [...]* so you know you’re being talked about’, and another said other mothers asked her *‘do you think it’s fair that [your daughter] is able to run in the cross country with the girls?’* Mothers also reported stress from engaging in ‘intensive mothering’ (Ryan, 2018), putting all their energy into supporting their transgender child in the absence of support from their child’s father, particularly in the initial stages of their child’s transition. As one mother described:

It had a really negative effect on my marriage because I was like I am doing everything here. I’m going to psychologist’s appointments, I’m going to the doctor, I’m dealing with the mental health fallout from this for our kid who was self-harming, who was having suicidal ideation, so like what are you doing? Where are you? When we got married you said you would love me and support me, where is my support? Why is this all on me?

Another commented:

I think it did cause me a lot of stress, I kind of took it on as my mama bear role, whereas my husband is just like ‘okay, tell me what you did, great.’ I love my husband but...useless. [...] It’s like you watched the video that I researched and found.

Such gendered differences in parents’ experience of supporting their transgender child are suggested in the two drawings below, by two Asian⁵ parents we interviewed as a couple (Figures 2 and 3).

Caroline, the mother, drew a scene of parenting in general, saying she did not see any difference between parenting her transgender child and her other children. She drew a house with the words ‘stability/security’ next to it (representing her children’s basic needs), food (representing the importance of food in their culture – *‘because*

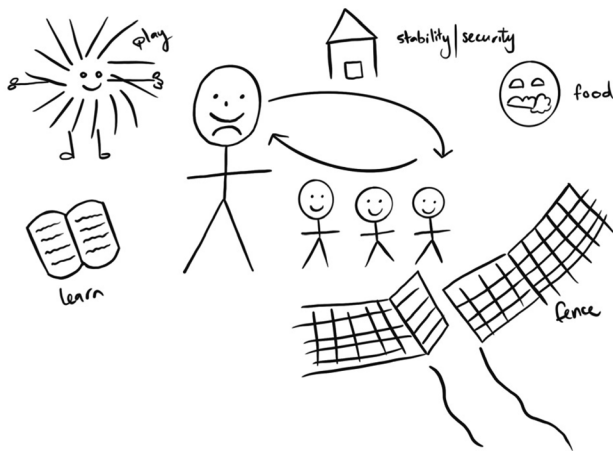


Figure 2. Caroline's drawing.

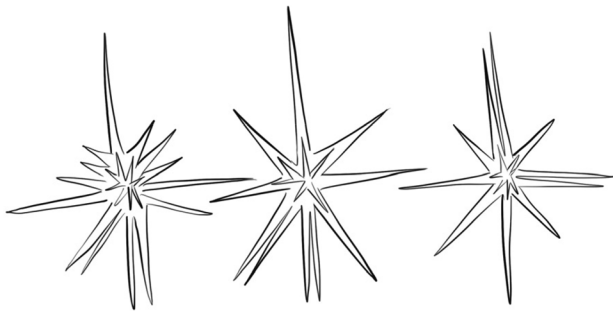


Figure 3. Uba's drawing.

we're Asian and feeding our kids is huge'), a fence (representing protection) but with the gate open to allow her children independence, a book with 'learn' next to it (representing educating her children), a 'wuzzle' (an imaginary character she used to tell her children stories about, representing 'imagination, fun and creativity'), and her three children in a row in the middle next to her as parent, with arrows going back and forth, representing the reciprocity of the parent/child relationship in terms of providing mutual 'comfort, reassurance and stability'. The mouth on the parent features a mixture of a smile and a frown, representing the joyous and challenging parts of parenting. This drawing can be viewed as a representation of Caroline's labor as a parent, including providing a safe environment, attending to her children's basic needs, teaching, entertaining and protecting them, while giving them space to grow.

Uba, the father, drew three stars in a row, echoing the visual depiction of the three children

in a row in Caroline's drawing. These stars represented his wonder at, and love of, his children:

They're the centre of our world at the moment and every time we see them, we see them shine in different areas, we see them grow, we see them just as amazing human beings.

Unlike Caroline, however, Uba is not present in his drawing. The labor in Caroline's drawing is also absent from his, which shows the beloved children without the work that surrounds them. His interview reflected a shared understanding between him and Caroline that she took on most of the work of parenting. He referred to her affectionately as the 'boss, skipper, captain, dictator, logistics manager' and said:

Parenting has always been Caroline's forte [...] I've just been a constant dad I suppose [...] I'm really lucky because Caroline takes on the stress of all that. I just tell her it's all good and it's all going to work out fine, whereas Caroline is always actively parenting or coaching or guiding or trying to protect them and stuff, so she takes on 99% of that burden I suppose and then the role that I slip into is just as a support role and not only as a support role for Caroline but as a support role for the kids as well. [...] I fill that space of giving them a hug and saying it's all ok.

As a result of being more engaged than her husband in the active work of advocating for her children, Caroline experiences a lot of stress as a parent—'I find parenting incredibly stressful, it takes all of me, it takes the guts of me, it takes every single inch of me...I just find parenting incredibly stressful'. Three fathers we interviewed claimed to have led the process of supporting their transgender child within their family, bringing their child's mother along with them, so it is important not to generalize this experience to all mothers and fathers. Overall, though, the data supports the pattern of mothers taking on the greater burden of care when it comes to supporting their child's transition (Ryan, 2018), showing the disproportionate impact on mothers of gendered discourses of parenting.

While parenting transgender children leads to mothers engaging in gendered practices such as intensive mothering, it can also lead them to 'question the gender beliefs they have taken for granted' (Ryan, 2018) or even to reconsider their

own gender (Ishii, 2018). Caroline currently identifies as female but said she had considered whether she might be non-binary since her child had come out as transgender:

Up until recently I absolutely would have said I am absolutely a cisgender woman, but I think I feel a little bit differently now [...] My child's experiences have definitely made me think about gender a little bit more, partly because my child at this age is very similar to how I was at the same age and if I had had the language and the space I think potentially....It does not bother me to be called any pronoun. It would not bother me in the slightest to be called he or they but I do go by she.

Another mother also said she wondered whether there might be 'some non-binary or gender-fluid aspect' to her. Rather than being related to gender, the pattern in our data is that it was the parent who reported taking on the greatest portion of parenting support of their transgender child who reported rethinking their approaches to gender in such ways. Three fathers said their child's transition had led them to reexamine their own relationship to masculinity, one reflecting:

It's really hard for me to relate to not feeling the gender that I'm born with because I'm not even sure what that is to me. What actually is being male? What does it mean, what is it?

Ryan (2018) views this questioning of gender as a paradox when applied to mothers, who both break down and reinforce gender norms *via* the intensive labor they put into supporting their transgender child, thereby reinforcing their own gendered oppression. Our data is more nuanced in this respect, with fathers also questioning gender when they took on the main parent support role in their child's transition. We contend that, whatever their gender, the experience of supporting a transgender child can lead parents to rethink their beliefs about gender, representing both a challenge and an opportunity to break free from dominant discourses of gender.

Queering gender

Several participants drew family portraits in the form of stick figures, to show how their family dynamics had evolved *via* parenting a transgender child. For parents who had subscribed to

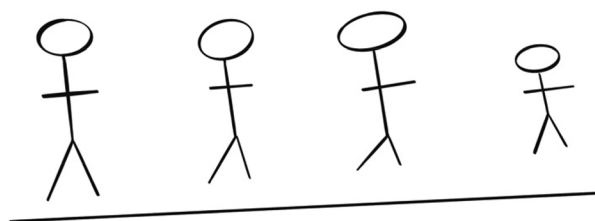


Figure 4. Taylor's drawing.

conventional or traditional gender norms before their child came out, this represented a significant change, which one described as 'a seismic shift'. For parents who had been parenting with more expansive or flexible gender norms to start with, it was less of an adjustment. The drawing in Figure 4, made by Taylor, the one non-binary parent we interviewed, represents a 'gender-neutral' family they strived to create from the beginning, where none are visibly gendered, and all are roughly the same height, with just the youngest child slightly smaller. Having experienced a conservative, religious, and highly gendered upbringing from which they were determined to distance themselves, Taylor's drawing reflects a refusal to impose gender norms on their children and a desire to create a family dynamic of 'equal autonomy' where the children are viewed as 'individual human beings' and the parents do not impinge on their subjectivity. Here no shift in family gender norms was required, the participant remarking that their drawing might appear 'soulless', yet 'there is so much possibility'.

The relative starkness of Taylor's drawing was echoed in the drawings of two further participants, who were both queer (one pansexual, the other lesbian). Both these participants asserted there was nothing distinctive about parenting a transgender child as opposed to any other child. One drew a single word—'parenting'—and said that '95% of parenting a trans[gender] kid is the same as parenting a cis[gender] kid', referring to the everyday tasks of getting children ready for school and into bed on time. The second declined the invitation to draw, saying she could not think of an image that would capture the experience, asking: 'is there a difference between a transgender child and a child?'. Taylor echoed these points in interview, commenting that being transgender was 'normal', 'a non-issue', 'not the main thing, it's

just something that they are and *'just a point of difference—because it's not the norm—statistically it is a difference'*. In underlining the normality of their experience, these participants resisted pathologising discourses that present transgender children as abnormal and constructed counter-discourses of depathologisation, whereby being transgender is a form of gender rather than a failure of gender (Meadow, 2018). In so doing, the parents attempted to normalize their child's experience and remove stigma from them.

While Taylor's own non-normative gender may have made it easier for them to accept a transgender identity for their child than some other parents, the gendered parenting norms they encountered in supporting their child also exacerbated their own feelings of gender-based exclusion. Despite identifying as 'gender-neutral', they said they choose to go by she/her in a medical context to avoid any opportunity for others to question their gender as an influence on their child being transgender. They also admitted they had started sending their male partner to the hospital *'in his work shirt, cufflinks, six feet tall, to do his man thing'* in interacting with doctors in relation to their child's access to gender-affirming healthcare, a context in which they faced (mis)gendered forms of disrespect:

For me, what has triggered so much anger is being cast as the difficult mum, which just pushes all my buttons. [...] All those tropes of the mother really make me so angry. What on a gut level annoys me the most about it is I don't even identify as a mother. And that's what really, really makes me angry, because there are these perceptions that are so entrenched about what is a mother? What is a father? What is a child? What is a girl child? What is a boy child?

Other queer parents we interviewed faced similar challenges, feeling subject to greater scrutiny than straight parents. This initially made one lesbian participant cautious to accept her child's gender:

We just wanted to make sure that it came from her. I guess we felt quite conscious being lesbians...it was very much only led by her. Maybe I worried myself, like is it that she thinks women are cool or...you'd never put it on someone else but when it's yourself you do go, is there any chance this is...? You want it not to be about you.

On the other hand, all the queer participants drew on discourses of queer pride and resistance to understand their child's difference and advocate for their rights. Taylor made a connection between current transphobic discourses and historical homophobic discourses during the HIV/AIDS epidemic, noting that attitudes toward gay people have since improved. Talking about how they managed their own stress associated with parenting a transgender child in a cisnormative society, they said it was *'important to look back over history to previous issues of moral panic and not to catastrophise about them [...] because things are changing so quickly'*. They also referred to the continuity of transgender experience over time, saying:

I draw strength from examples where people have been gender-diverse since history began. [...] Look beyond the panic and beyond the stress [...] transness has always been there.

Decolonizing gender

Prior to colonization, Māori and Pacific societies were open to gender fluidity (Kerekere, 2017) but this was suppressed by the colonizers to assimilate Indigenous populations into Western society. Although many Māori and Pacific people have since internalized restrictive norms of gender and sexuality, there is a contemporary movement in Aotearoa of rediscovering and celebrating takatāpui and Pacific queer identities as part of decolonization (Kerekere, 2017; Thomsen et al., 2023). Māori scholars Kerekere (2017) and Laurence (2020) investigated whānau (extended family) support of takatāpui youth, some of whom were transgender, using interviews with young people and their whānau. They found that whānau support may be even more important for takatāpui youth than for non-Māori queer youth, as whānau is a primary source of mana (dignity) in Māori communities. Understanding that transgender people have always existed in te ao Māori and Pacific societies can help children within these cultures feel strong in their gender and cultural identity.

Some of our Māori participants drew on takatāpui discourses of acceptance of gender fluidity to honor the gender of their child. As a takatāpui mother described this:

Something for me coming from a te ao Māori perspective is the belief that we inherit wairua [spirit] from our ancestors, from our tūpuna. Being able to look at it from that perspective and to say to my son 'you are your ancestor, there was someone in our ancestry who was like you, and you've inherited that and that is totally natural and normal' has really helped me to understand and accept a bit more. It is very affirming for my son, the belief that that is where his wairua has come from. Because we have so many trans cousins, at least one of our tūpuna was, and that has passed to him. He looks at that as an affirmation of his Māori identity.

This participant is Sāmoan as well as Māori, and drew connections to Pacific histories of gender fluidity in similar ways:

Being Sāmoan, gender fluidity is a lot more normal. We all know about fa'afafine, right? It helped me a lot because I already knew that different gender expressions were accepted in that culture.

Maria, a Sāmoan mother, drew the drawing in Figure 5. A talented painter, she made the drawing prior to the interview and brought it along.



Figure 5. Maria's drawing.

The painting depicts her chest with her child inside her heart, representing her fierce love for her son ('he's just my heart'). Her ribs protect him from 'the outside,' while also giving him space to grow in who he is and 'push beyond the gender binary in a safe space,' with the flowers representing him blooming into self-knowledge.

Also depicted are Maria's efforts to make a space for her son's gender within the constraints of contemporary Sāmoan culture. Surrounding the drawing are Pacific patterns, indicating that Maria's culture is omnipresent for her. She described the importance of her son's cultural identity and how acceptance by his Sāmoan peers was key to him finding comfort in his gender:

My son has felt more acceptance being able to participate in cultural activities, share his culture, and be respected by his peers. [...] Being accepted by the Sāmoan boys was when I feel like he kind of relaxed, when he got his boys that would stand up for him, I think it made him feel like he belonged.

While this was a source of strength for her son, Maria also referred to difficulties the family had faced in meeting the cultural expectations of their religion when it came to her son's gender:

Culture encompasses everything, and it can either be something that is really beautiful and protective, or it can be something that can be sometimes hard to navigate.

Christianity came to Sāmoa *via* colonization, bringing with it restrictive Western gender norms, and all three of our Sāmoan participants mentioned this as a barrier to their child being accepted by some members of their family or community. As Maria described:

Across Indigenous cultures there is more gender fluidity and I think it was, when I think about it, I think about the social norms and how culture is constructed and I do feel like because of colonisation perhaps the view of where that sits got a little bit muddled along the way, in terms of how we then started to try and fit our culture, our traditions, into a Western way as opposed to weaving the Western way into our culture, and I think for our gender fluid people that became a lot more rigid.

Maria's son faced prejudice from the church to which they belonged, where he was othered and shamed, resulting in him asking, 'Why Does God

hate me? This prompted Maria's family to leave the church. Maria described the black and white lines at the top of her drawing as representing the black and white way the world around them sees gender, which places a burden on her shoulders. Maria observed that traditional Sāmoan patterns are *'very intricate and very detailed and they're always in proper lines'*, but the way she drew them they are *'off center and they don't quite fit'*, representing her attempts to find a place for her and her child's experience within contemporary Sāmoan culture. She noted that *'just because it's not traditional doesn't make it any less Sāmoan'*. Reflecting on what she saw as the two forces in Sāmoan culture regarding gender fluidity—historical practices of acceptance versus colonization and religion—Maria said it was where her son had been able to integrate the two that he had felt most happy in himself. Her and her son's culture thus represented both a constraint and a source of strength in his affirmation of his gender.

Further intersections

The participants focused mostly on oppression related to gender, ethnicity and sexuality, but some further intersectional features of their experiences came up in the interviews and may also have influenced their perspectives. One was that many of the participants' children were neurodivergent, reflecting the potential connection between gender diversity and neurodiversity (Cooper et al., 2022; Goetz & Adams, 2022). Another was that several of the children were physically disabled, perhaps reflecting the higher proportion of disability among queer youth in Aotearoa (Fenaughty et al., 2022). Some of the parents were also neurodivergent and/or disabled. While these topics were only partially addressed in the interviews, our sense is that the minoritised experiences of parents and children across these dimensions also have an impact on how they experience their child's gender, and this would be worth investigating more in future work.

Conclusion: intersectional resilience and resistance

This article has explored the intersectional perspectives of parents of transgender children in

Aotearoa. In so doing, it builds on the growing research on intersectional experiences of transgender people, extending this intersectional focus to those who surround and support them. This is important in the context of a previously homogeneous view in which 'the universalizing of "transgender" perpetuates a white and predominantly middle-class transgender experience, identity, and collective' (de Vries, 2012, p.64). In line with this intersectional turn in transgender studies (de Vries & Sojka, 2022; Paz Galupo & Campbell Orphanidys, 2022), our research illustrates the importance of considering race, gender and sexuality when studying the parents of transgender children too.

We argue that the intersectional perspectives of the parents we interviewed reveal both challenges and strengths. They reflect the burdens of intersectional oppression, but they also foster the parents' capacity for engaging in discursive resistance to advance their children's interests. For both these reasons, we need to hear more of these perspectives in research on parents of transgender children. Such research will better reflect the diversity of lived experience of parents, helping us to better understand them and thus better support them to support their children. It is also likely to highlight important forms of discursive resistance that may have been overlooked through the narrow focus on a subset of participants.

Our findings raise the question of to what extent the participants' intersectional perspectives impact their personal resilience and capacity for resistance to oppression. Overall, does the intersectional lens to which these participants have access make their experience of raising a transgender child easier or harder? Some authors posit that experiences of multiple marginalization make people more resilient overall. Galman (2020) suggests that previous experience of discrimination in other areas may assist parents in achieving resilience in the face of secondary stigma:

I suggest a combination of prior experiences with marginalization combined with fear for their child as the recipe for willingness to support, transform, advocate and recognize their child's horizontal identity. [...] Notably, the prior critical experiences of being gay or lesbian themselves, being second language learners, immigrants, religious minorities or even women was enough for

them to understand and internalize the necessity of that swimming upstream. (p. 16)

Cyrus (2017) suggests that members of multiply minoritised groups may have access to ‘a protective mechanism from psychological stress’ (p. 196) and proposes that:

Considering how the multiply marginalized achieve “success” could add more depth and understanding to these issues. For example, exploring the variations of resilience would help frame the concept of minority stress in encouraging terms rather than that of a “struggle.” (pp. 200–201)

Looking at the experiences shared by our participants, we are wary of too optimistic a view. The participants reported suffering a great deal from the multiple forms of oppression they encountered and suggesting that these forms of oppression ‘made them stronger’ would be to do them an injustice. That said, it was also evident to us that the perspectives multiply minoritised participants brought to parenting a transgender child enhanced their ability to critically assess the challenges of their child’s experience, empathize with their minoritisation, and make decisions about how best to protect them. Ollie’s drawing of her children surrounded by their whānau, iwi and the queer community (Figure 1) constitutes discursive evidence of the multiple layers of protection she sought to build around her children, based on her intersectional experiences as a queer Māori mother. Several other parents with minoritised ethnicities or sexualities also said they were aided in supporting their child’s gender because they were ‘used to being different’. As authors who are multiply minoritised ourselves, we too feel that our experiences of oppression in one area have helped us cope with oppression in another, even if at times this multiplication of oppression exhausts us and ramps up our stress. In the end, perhaps both things can be true at once: intersectional oppression multiplies harm and it also multiplies capacity for resistance.

Implications

This research has practical implications for health practitioners, researchers and parents of transgender children.

Health practitioners could work to increase their understanding of the world views and lived experiences of parents who are not white, heterosexual, and/or cisgender, among other aspects of social diversity. They could learn more about how the intersections parents stand at influence their realities and adapt their approaches to the individual circumstances of parents, rather than assuming a one-size-fits-all approach. Health practitioners could approach the minority identities of parents (e.g. their cultural, sexual or gender identity) not as problems but as resources they can use to support their families.

Researchers could continue to expand knowledge of the intersectional experiences of parents of transgender children, alongside those of other family members who support these young people. At a minimum, this includes ensuring that research participants are of diverse cultural and social backgrounds. More substantially, it includes attending closely to the intersectional perspectives of these participants during analysis, including being open to uncovering under-researched intersections of social categories. Taking an intersectional approach in this area is likely to require different approaches to recruitment (e.g. building high levels of trust with under-represented communities) and different forms of data collection (e.g. culturally appropriate and neurodivergent-friendly research methods).

Parents could reflect on which parts of their identity inform their approach to raising their transgender children and what this means for them in terms of challenges and strengths. They may also wish to connect with other parents to share strategies to deal with any intersectional oppression they experience, while strengthening their connections based on shared features of identity.

Notes

1. We use ‘transgender’ as an umbrella term to refer to anyone whose gender does not conform to dominant social expectations associated with their gender assigned at birth, including non-binary people.
2. We later discuss two pieces of work done by Māori academics looking at whānau (extended family) support of takatāpui (Māori queer) youth (Kerekere, 2017; Laurence, 2020). A further recent contribution is Howe (2022) on parent advocacy in schools.

3. In two cases we interviewed both of a child's parents.
4. We used the term 'gender-diverse' at the time of the interviews, but have since adopted the term 'transgender', following the advice of Gender Minorities Aotearoa, who noted that 'gender-diverse' is often used by parents as a euphemism for transgender. To us, both terms have the same meaning when used as umbrella terms, so we adopted the practice of the main community organisation for transgender people in Aotearoa.
5. We do not further specify ethnicity in order to preserve anonymity of the participants.

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