

The Experiences of Parents who Affirm Their Child's Diverse Gender Identity

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Abstract

The gender identities and expressions of gender diverse children, those children who defy, and broaden the confines of an externally imposed binary system of gender, illustrate the limitations of gender as a binary system by refusing to fit neatly into the opposing categories of female or male, feminine/masculine and/or girl or boy. Raising a gender diverse child in a world that promotes and sanctions binary conceptions of gender is often an unexpected and challenging experience for parents. This dissertation examined the blogs of four parents who are raising gender diverse children, in order to answer the following research questions: (a) What are the experiences over time of parents who are affirmatively raising a gender diverse child? and (b) What is the function of online blogging for parents who blog about supportively raising their gender diverse child?

This work is composed of two manuscripts, each devoted to one research question. A narrative-informed thematic analysis was applied to four blogs located in the public domain and written by mothers who were parenting a pre-pubescent gender diverse child. Manuscript one explored the experiences of parents who are raising a gender diverse child. Results indicated that parents engaged in ongoing interpersonal and intrapersonal processes in order to understand how to best raise their gender diverse child. Additionally, discourses emerged from the texts indicating that in order to supportively raise a gender expansive or transgender child, parents must be willing to shift between the roles of leading and following, while continually engaging in an iterative process of meaning-making with their child in the arena of gender. Manuscript two examined the function of blogging for parents who write about affirmatively raising a gender diverse child. Results revealed how parents used the blogging platform to engage in parental advocacy and activism. Various themes emerged from data analysis, including motives to create

and maintain blogs, and methods of promoting change through knowledge sharing, and modelling actions of change. Moreover, analysis of the blogs revealed the importance of the creation and maintenance of online community. Results were interpreted through the frames of mediated kinship and transformative gender justice. Finally, directions for future research are explored and implications for mental health practitioners are discussed.

Résumé

Les identités et les expressions de genre des enfants issu·e·s de la diversité de genre, c'est-à-dire ces enfants qui remettent en question et élargissent les limites de la binarité de genre imposée par le monde extérieur, illustrent les limites du genre en tant que système binaire en refusant de se ranger dans les catégories opposées de « féminité » et de « masculinité » ou d'« homme » et de « femme ». Élever un ou une enfant issu·e de la diversité de genre dans un monde qui préconise et sanctionne une conception binaire du genre est souvent une expérience difficile à laquelle les parents ne s'attendent pas. Cette dissertation a examiné les blogues de quatre parents qui élèvent des enfants issu·e·s de la diversité de genre afin de répondre aux questions de recherche suivantes: (a) Quelles sont les expériences des parents qui élèvent un ou une enfant issu·e de la diversité de genre de manière positive au fil du temps? et (b) Quelle est la fonction des blogues pour les parents qui écrivent sur l'éducation positive de leur enfant issu·e de la diversité de genre?

Ce travail est composé de deux manuscrits, chacun consacré à une question de recherche. Une analyse thématique fondée sur le récit a été appliquée à quatre blogues publics rédigés par des mères qui élevaient un ou une enfant prépubère issu·e de la diversité de genre. Le premier manuscrit explore les expériences des parents qui élèvent un ou une enfant issu·e de la diversité de genre. Les résultats indiquent que les parents s'engagent dans des processus interpersonnels et intrapersonnels continus afin de comprendre comment élever leur enfant issu·e de la diversité de genre de la meilleure façon possible. De plus, des discours ont émergé de ces écrits indiquant que les parents doivent être prêts à jouer à la fois le rôle du leader et celui de l'élève pour élever avec un ou une enfant transgenre ou issu·e de la diversité de genre ou transgenre en lui apportant un soutien, et ce, tout en s'engageant continuellement dans un processus récurrent de construction de

sens avec leur enfant dans le domaine du genre. Le deuxième manuscrit examine la fonction des blogues pour les parents qui écrivent sur l'éducation positive d'un ou une enfant issu·e de la diversité de genre. Les résultats ont révélé comment les parents ont utilisé les plateformes de blogue pour s'engager dans le plaidoyer et l'activisme parental. L'analyse des données a permis de dégager divers thèmes, dont les motifs de création et de maintien des blogues, les méthodes de promotion du changement par le biais du partage des connaissances et la modélisation des actions de changement. De plus, l'analyse des blogues a illustré l'importance de la création et du maintien d'une communauté en ligne. Les résultats ont été interprétés à travers les lentilles des liens de parenté médiés et de la justice de genre transformative. Enfin, des directions pour des recherches futures sont explorées et les implications pour les praticiens de la santé mentale sont abordées.

Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to two important people who were on this earthly plain at the beginning of this process but who are elsewhere at the close. To my nonna, Ada Iannarelli, who would be very proud to finally have a doctor in the family, someone who would be able to heal that pain in her shoulder (or so she imagined!). And to my dear friend, Helene Petoussis, who taught me what it means to live and die on your own terms, with grace, dignity, and an unwavering sense of cool and humour.

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researchers that allowed this dissertation to be written in community during a pandemic of isolation. My gratitude also goes out to the members of my clinical community at Westmount Psychological Services, especially Dr. Shawna Atkins, from whom I've learned, and luckily, continue to learn so much. And to my colleagues at the Pride Therapy Network of Montreal, I feel so fortunate to be building a community of care with you through which our values are made manifest through practice.

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Contribution to Original Knowledge

This dissertation represents an original contribution to knowledge by expanding the knowledge on the experiences of parents who affirm their child's gender diversity and is the first study to examine the roll of blogging for these parents. The findings related to first research question addressing the experiences of parents who were affirmatively raising a gender diverse child confirmed and reinforced the existing literature on this topic. Applying a discourse analysis to the emergent themes allowed for new understanding of how parents navigate the varied contexts of raising a gender diverse child. The second research question addressed the role of blogging for parents who are affirmatively raising a gender diverse child. This appears to be the first work on this topic. Moreover, using blogs as data represents an under-utilized and innovative approach in counselling psychology, and thus represents a methodological contribution to this field, allowing for an exploration of experiences that are salient to parents over time. The contribution to original knowledge is explained in more detail at the end of the dissertation in the General Discussion, found on page 206 of this document.

Contribution of Authors

The author of this dissertation was responsible for conceptualizing the study design, conducting the literature review, data collection, analysis, and interpretation, as well as the writing of the dissertation. The student's doctoral research supervisor, Dr. Ada Sinacore, is the second author on both manuscripts included in this dissertation. She was involved throughout the entire course of this research project. In particular, she supported the writing of the first manuscript, and served as an auditor to validate the process of data analysis. She guided the course of research and provided invaluable feedback and recommendations during every phase of the research process.

Chapter 1: Introduction

Gender identity, an internal felt sense of femaleness, maleness, or an identity that is neither male nor female (American Psychological Association, 2011) and gender expression, the demonstration of femininity and/or masculinity (e.g., via fashion, hair style, movement, name, etc.) (Kessler & McKenna, 1985; Wilchins, 2004), are important and meaningful aspects of self-concept (Jackson & Warin, 2000). Historically, in Western medicine, gender identity has been presumed to develop in accordance with one's sex, which is assigned at birth by a doctor who briefly inspects a newborn's anatomy. Gender expression is expected to follow suit—for example, a newborn with a vulva is pronounced female, is expected to develop a female gender identity, and is expected to express gender in congruence with the cultural norms prescribed for girls and women, which include appearance, preferences, roles, and behaviours (Money & Ehrhardt, 1972; Kessler & McKenna, 1978; Zucker & Bradley, 1995). This binary conceptualization of sex, gender identity, gender expression, and gender role has determined the prescription and enforcement of accepted gendered (masculine or feminine) identity, expression, and performance.

In recent years, many scholars have come to oppose the binary concept of gender, instead arguing that gender is best conceived of as a spectrum that includes a multitude of gender identities and infinite possibilities for expression (e.g., Hyde et al., 2019). Moreover, such experts submit that gender diversity represents the natural and healthy variety of gender identities and expressions inherent within the human experience (e.g., Temple Newhook, Winters, et al., 2018; Pyne, 2012). A broader conceptualization of gender seems to be reflected in the epidemiological research on gender diversity in youth and childhood. A review of the recent epidemiological research indicates that approximately 0.7% and 2.7% of youth in the

United States identify as transgender (Clark et al., 2014; Connolly et al., 2016; Eisenberg et al., 2017; Herman et al., 2017; Shields et al., 2013; Sumia et al., 2017). In a similar vein, a study examining the genders of elementary-school-aged children estimated that 39% of girls and 23% of boys display gender non-conforming behaviours and preferences (e.g., girls playing with trucks, boys disliking rough-and-tumble play; Sandberg et al., 1993). Thus, childhood seems to be a time when many children try on a variety of gender expressions. Keo-Meier and Ehrensaft (2018) suggest the umbrella term, gender diverse, to describe all children who defy, question, or expand the limits of an externally imposed, binary conception of gender.

Due to the pervasiveness of genderism¹, gender diverse children and youth, who by their very existence challenge the limits of an externally imposed binary understanding of gender, commonly report experiences of discrimination and bullying (D'Augelli et al., 2006; Wyss, 2004). D'Augelli et al. (2006) report that verbal harassment of gender diverse children can begin as early as age six, and physical attacks as early as age eight. Unsurprisingly, gender diverse children and youth also report experiencing difficult peer relationships at school (Cohen-Kettenis et al., 2003; McGuire et al., 2010). It is well established that childhood bullying due to genderism results in long-lasting negative mental health and psychosocial adjustment outcomes persisting into adulthood (Carver et al., 2003; Kosciw et al., 2012; Kosciw et al., 2018; McGuire et al., 2010; Wallien & Cohen-Kettenis., 2008; Yunger et al., 2004).

In addition to experiencing negative effects such as bullying at school, gender diverse children may also experience distress if their gender identity, a crucial aspect of self-concept, is

¹ 'Genderism is the system of culturally-informed beliefs reinforcing the idea that gender is binary (boy/girl, man/woman) and determined by binary biological sex characteristics (male/female). In modern western societies, it has traditionally been expected that gender will align with assigned sex and regulate gender expression and presentation—the performance of which includes sexual orientation, dress, mannerisms, interests, and other behaviours (Hill & Willoughby, 2005). Genderism, like racism or sexism, is a form of social and systemic bias and prejudice.

not witnessed and mirrored back to them by their friends, community, and perhaps most crucially, by their family. For most young children, parental relationships represent critical attachment figures. Thus, parents can either amplify the negative effects of transphobia and gender microaggressions experienced outside of the home (Ehrensaft, 2011a; Gartner & Sterzing, 2018; Parker et al., 2018) or provide a safe haven where children can safely explore their developing sense of themselves (e.g., Ehrensaft, 2016). There is mounting evidence that families play a critical role in the lives of gender diverse youth. Familial rejection, such as bullying and harassment from family members, results in negative psychological and physiological outcomes for gender diverse youth (Klein & Golub, 2016). In contrast, parental affirmation of diverse gender identities and expressions results in positive mental health outcomes (Katz-Wise et al., 2018; Olson et al., 2016; Ryan, 2010; Travers et al., 2012). Moreover, parental support appears to provide significantly protective effects against the victimization that gender diverse children may experience outside of the home (Hill & Menvielle, 2009).

Although it is evident that parental figures and families can have a significant impact on the wellbeing of gender diverse youth, there has been little research devoted to examination of the experience of parenting a gender diverse child. Crucially, growing evidence suggests that affirmatively raising a gender diverse child can result in unique parenting challenges. While not all parents experience negative emotions when learning of their child's diverse gender identity and/or expression (e.g., Boenke, 2008; Ehrensaft, 2011b; Pepper, 2012), many parents have reported experiencing difficult feelings such as confusion (Cooper, 2000; Lev, 2004; Zucker, 2000), shame and guilt (Boenke, 2008; Lev, 2004), grief (Menvielle & Tuerk, 2002; Norwood, 2012; Wren, 2002), and fear and anxiety (Ehrensaft, 2011a; Lev, 2004; Ryan, 2010). Moreover,

some parents who affirm their child's gender diversity have encountered secondary stigma or blame for their child's gender expression (Johnson & Benson, 2014; Zamboni, 2006). Parents may also experience the loss of family or friends due to genderism, thus it is not surprising that parents who choose to affirm their child's gender diversity often report feeling rejected, isolated, and alone (Menvielle & Tuerk, 2002; Pullen Sansfaçon et al., 2015; Wren, 2002).

Despite the fact that research on gender diverse children unequivocally points to the criticality of parental support, research on the experiences of these parents is only beginning. Furthermore, while parenting a child is a relational and developmental process, the majority of studies on parenting a gender diverse child are retrospective in nature, and therefore may not adequately capture aspects of the parenting process that unfold over time. It is clear that further inquiry is warranted to provide a more thorough understanding of the experiences across time and space of parents who affirm their gender diverse children. Thus, this research project aims to contribute to addressing this gap in the literature through a systematic analysis of four multi-year narratives in blog form that describe, first-hand, the daily lived experience of parenting a gender-diverse child.

This dissertation is comprised of six chapters. Following this introductory chapter, Chapter 2 will present a detailed review of the relevant literature, beginning with an important discussion on gender-related terminology and the significance of discrepancies in the terms used to describe gender diversity in adults versus children. Next, different approaches to the psychological treatment of gender diverse children are summarized, and research on diverse gender identity development in the context of family is considered. A review of the existing literature on the experiences of parents affirmatively raising a gender diverse child will then be presented, followed by identification of gaps in the literature and an explanation of the

motivation for the current research project. Chapter 2 will conclude with the presentation of the research questions considered in this project, and a brief discussion of the researcher's assumptions.

Chapter 3 will describe the theoretical conceptualization and research methods used in this work, beginning with a definition of feminist social constructivist (FSC) epistemology and narrative inquiry. The assumptions underlying a FSC epistemological framework will be outlined, followed by elucidation of the principles of narrative inquiry: temporality, sociality, and spatiality. Next, links between the theoretical framework and methods will be outlined, as well as the rationale for employing these approaches for this particular research project. Following a discussion on the subjective stance of the researcher, the use of blogs as a data source will be carefully considered. The ethical considerations relative to using blogs as data will be given particular attention, including issues related to characterization of data, privacy concerns and issues of copyright. The procedure for this study will be outlined, including how blogs were selected for this research, and descriptions of each of the four blogs in the study sample. Finally, techniques used to ensure the credibility and trustworthiness of the data will be discussed.

Chapters 4 and 5 report this project's findings in manuscript format. The first manuscript presents findings related to generated themes of sociality and temporality, and details the interpersonal and intrapersonal processes that parents experience over time as they raise a gender diverse child. These findings are then further developed through the application of a Foucauldian discourse analysis, in which the dominant discourses and associated tensions throughout the data are analyzed in light of possible implications for personal and social change. The second manuscript is predominantly concerned with online space and practices, as that is the particular

context where parents created and maintained their blogs about raising a gender diverse child.

The results reveal how these parents used the blogging platform to engage in parental advocacy and activism. These findings are interpreted through the frameworks of mediated kinship² and transformative gender justice³.

Chapter 6 will synthesize the findings of the two aforementioned studies, outlining the strengths and unique contributions of this research, identifying its limitations, and offering suggestions for future research. Importantly, this research concludes that mental health practitioners may be on the front lines of supporting gender diverse children and their families, thus implications for mental health service providers are delineated.

² Ginsburg (2012) defines mediated kinship as the experience of publicly sharing one's intimate experience, resulting in connection with others of similar experience.

³ Transformative gender justice is a framework developed by Travers (2008) that recognizes the limitations of a rigid binary gender system as well as the societal norms and structures that have developed based on a dualistic system of gender.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Background

The idea that gender is binary, and that individuals can and should be categorized as male or female, man or woman, predominates the discourse on gender in modern Western society. Gender identity, one's internal sense of being male, female, or something else, such as a non-binary gender (American Psychological Association, 2011), is presumed to develop in accordance with one's sex, which is assigned at birth via the cursory examination of a newborn's anatomy. Thus, in a sense, both sex and gender are assigned at birth⁴. Based on this assumption, then, babies with vulvas will develop female identities and assume a feminine gender expression, while babies with penises will develop male gender identities and perform a masculine gender expression, in accordance with prescribed cultural norms for each binary gender. These norms encompass one's appearance, preferences, roles, and behaviours (Money & Ehrhardt, 1972; Kessler & McKenna, 1978; Zucker & Bradley, 1995). This binary conceptualization of sex, gender identity, gender expression, and gender roles defines socially-acceptable gendered (masculine or feminine) identity, expression, and performance.

For many individuals, a binary conceptualization of sex and gender may accurately describe their experience of gender. Such correspondence between an internal, felt sense of gender, sex assigned at birth, and gender expression that satisfies externally determined cultural expectations, is referred to as cisgender (American Psychological Association, 2015; Green, 2006; Serano, 2006). The experience and/or expression of gender in a manner that departs from

⁴ Since the 1950's in Western Europe and America, medical interventions and/or surgeries were commonly used to reduce sex variations in intersex infants and children (Khanna, 2021; See Appendix A for definition of the term intersex.) in order to prevent the perceived problems of a future gay or transgender identity (Meyer-Bahlberg, Dolezal, Baker, & New, 2008). These actions reinforce the erasure of intersex individuals and reiterates binary sex as the only legitimate possibility.

the gender binary has historically been labeled deviant or unnatural in Western culture, and this belief persists today, such that individuals who transgress gender norms often pay a high penalty. To illustrate, it is considered manly to wear a suit and tie, appear buff and brawny, enjoy hunting as a leisure activity, be stoic in one's emotional expression, or have a military career. However, these same expressions, preferences, and behaviours have traditionally been considered aberrant for a woman in Western society, and can call into question her femininity or womanliness, often through questioning of her sexual orientation (see Butler's *Gender Trouble* [2011] for a description of this phenomenon, which they term, the heterosexual matrix). Violation of gender expectations can result in discrimination, harassment, and violence (e.g., Gordon & Meyer, 2007; Grossman & D'Augelli, 2006). Transgender individuals whose gender identification and/or gender expression conflicts with the sex they were assigned at birth based on their anatomy are especially at risk of experiencing verbal and physical violence (Diamond et al., 2011).

The dominant transgender narrative presumes a discord between a person's psychological gender and anatomical sex (Diamond et al., 2011). In this conceptualization, transgender individuals feel trapped in the wrong body, and changing their anatomy to be more aligned with their psychological gender will ameliorate the conflict. This discourse, which ultimately reiterates the gender binary, is certainly true of the experience of numerous transgender individuals. However, many transgender people feel that their gender identity lies outside of the gender binary (Diamond et al., 2011; Girchick, 2008). In the last decade, a different conceptualization of gender altogether has been gaining ground: that gender is not in fact binary, but can be better understood as a spectrum encompassing a range of gender identities that may or may not align with a person's anatomical sex (APA, 2015; Harrison et al., 2012; Kuper et al., 2012). Thus, rather than making a transition from one gender to another, individuals may

embrace a more fluid or ambiguous gender identity in which masculinity and femininity are combined in various ways, or not included at all (Diamond et al., 2011; See Appendix A for a definition of the term transition.). Likewise, the language that people use to define themselves and their gender continues to shift and evolve to reflect different identities subsumed under the transgender umbrella, including (but by no means limited to) man, woman, gender fluid, genderqueer, nonbinary or enby, AMAB, AFAB, transmasculine and transfeminine, and queer (see Appendix A for definition of terms).

Within the last decade, as transgender identities have become more accepted in mainstream culture, researcher attention has moved toward studying experiences of gender diversity in children and youth. Although parents and guardians are often implicated in studies of the lives of their children, until quite recently there has been little attention given to the experiences of caregivers raising gender diverse children. This literature review will explore the concepts and approaches relevant to understanding the experiences of parents of gender diverse, prepubescent children. Children's needs and experiences change as they grow through various developmental periods, and naturally, the demands and experiences of parents will also shift. In an attempt to capture a distinct period of parenting related to the study at hand, this text, where possible, emphasizes literature related children who have not yet reached puberty. However, while the empirical literature regarding gender diverse children and their families is developing, the breadth and scope of this research is limited. Thus, at times, this literature review also includes research related to gender diverse teens and adults, and their families. This section begins with an important discussion of terminology, and points to the discrepancies in language used to describe transgender and nonbinary adults and children. Next, different approaches to the psychological treatment of gender diverse children are summarized, following which, the

literature on transgender identity development in the context of family is considered. Finally, literature focusing on the experiences of parents who are affirmatively raising a gender diverse child is examined. Gaps in the literature are identified, and motivation for the current research project is explained. This section concludes with the research questions considered in this study, and a brief discussion of the researcher's subjective stance.

Terminology

Language serves as an important means to self-identify and self-determine, and carries the potential to recognize and disseminate subjugated knowledge (Hartman, 2000). The evolution of language is shaped by external forces and systems of power, such as the geopolitical and generational realms (Davis, 2009). Language used to describe transgender identities has historically been pathologizing, particularly within the fields of medicine and psychology, quelling the knowledge and experiences of transgender people. In these realms, cisgenderism has been the prevailing norm. Cisgenderism, an ideology that invalidates and disqualifies self-understanding and self-determination of gender and bodies, commonly takes the forms of pathologizing (assuming that people's genders or bodies and associated experiences are unhealthy and treating them as such), misgendering (wrongly categorizing people's genders or bodies), and essentializing (assuming that all people fall into one of two gender categories – transgender or cisgender; Ansara & Berger, 2016; see Appendix A for further definition). The unique and evolving language developed by diverse transgender communities is a more accurate representation of such identities and realities (Burdge, 2007). Gender identities and expressions are complex, individual, and for some, fluid, and hence it follows that the language used to describe identities is multiple, evolving, and specific.

The language used in this dissertation was chosen by the author at a particular place and time in history, to serve the aim of enabling discussion of complex identities. While the author has attempted to use current language that affirms diverse gender identities and expressions, the vocabulary used in this document is imperfect. It is always best practice to employ the language that an individual uses to identify themselves. The language used to describe parents and children in this document is consistent with the terms used by the authors of the four blogs analyzed in this research study. However, some of the texts analyzed are living, developing documents, and therefore the identities described in this document may not continue to accurately represent those identities as they evolve.

Within the literature on gender identity, a noticeable shift in language occurs when referring to gender-sex incongruence during childhood in comparison to the language associated with gender-sex incongruence in adulthood. It seems that children who experience an incongruence between their sex and gender are referred to in far less certain terms. These terms include, but are not limited to: gender nonconforming, gender variant, gender creative, gender fluid, gender independent, and gender-ambidextrous, (see Keo-Meier & Ehrensaft, 2018, for an in-depth discussion of terms). This distinct set of terms for children may be due in part to the belief that the majority of children who identify as transgender will come to identify as cisgender as they move into adolescence and adulthood. This suggestion gained ground based on four follow-up studies conducted by Drummond et al. (2008), Steensma et al. (2011), Steensma et al. (2013), and Wallien and Cohen-Kettenis (2008), however, the soundness of these studies has been disputed based on methodological, theoretical, and ethical concerns (see Temple Newhook, Pyne, et al., 2018). Soloman, (2012, in Manning et al., 2018), suggests that hesitation to refer to children as transgender stems, in part, from the narrative of childhood being a time of innocence

and purity. This construction of childhood stands in direct opposition to the pathologizing narrative of transgender identities as deviant and unnatural. That is, an identity of child-like innocence or purity cannot co-exist with a deviant or unnatural transgender identity. Manning et al. (2018) submit that this kind of profound transphobia saturates North American society, and results in children rarely being referred to as transgender.

For the purposes of this dissertation, the terminology used is based on the conceptualization and guidance of Keo-Meier and Ehrensaft (2018). As with adults, when referring to children whose internal, felt sense of gender is different from their sex assigned at birth, the author uses the term *transgender*. For example, a transgender girl was assigned male at birth, and her gender identity is girl, or a non-binary child was assigned female at birth and their gender identity is non-binary. Keo-Meier and Ehrensaft (2018) differentiate transgender children from *gender expansive* children, individuals whose expression of gender differs from what is expected in a given culture. Whereas gender identity is invisible, gender expansiveness in children is discernable through preferences, behaviours, roles, and presentation. A gender expansive child's appearance and behaviour, in part or in whole, is not what is socially and culturally expected based on their assigned sex and gender. Gender expansive children are often labelled "tomboys" or "pink boys" (Keo-Meier & Ehrensaft, 2018, p. 8). To encompass transgender and gender expansive identities, an umbrella term suggested by Keo-Meier and Ehrensaft (2018) is *gender diverse*. This term refers to all children who defy, question, or expand the limits of an externally imposed, binary conception of gender. A child can embrace both transgender and gender expansive identities (Keo-Meier & Ehrensaft, 2018; Temple Newhook, Winters, et al., 2018). For example, a child assigned male at birth may identify as a girl and may also express their gender in ways that differ from the societal expectations of a girl, such as

having short hair, disliking dresses, or loving sports and rough and tumble play. A transgender girl's penchant for playing with cars and trucks or her dislike of dresses thus does not undermine her gender identity as girl, it simply means that she is a girl who likes cars and trucks and prefers pants to skirts (Temple Newhook, Winters, et al., 2018). The take-away message is that gender is best understood as a spectrum that includes a multitude of gender identities, with infinite possibilities for expression. Gender diversity represents a natural and healthy variety of possible gender identities and expressions inherent within the human experience (Temple Newhook, Winters, et al., 2018; Pyne, 2012).

Psychological Well-Being of Gender Diverse Children

The preponderance of research on transgender individuals remains rooted in adulthood experiences (Keo-Meier & Ehrensaft, 2018). This oversight is surprising given that gender identity develops during childhood, a time when many children explore a multitude of different gender expressions. Despite the paucity of epidemiological research, estimates indicate that between 0.7% and 2.7% of youth in the United States identify as transgender (Clark et al., 2014; Connolly et al., 2016; Eisenberg et al., 2017; Herman et al., 2017; Shields et al., 2013; Sumia et al., 2017). Moreover, increases in referral rates of young people to gender clinics have been witnessed recently in many parts of the world (Aitken et al., 2015; de Graaf et al., 2018; Wiepjes et al., 2018), likely due to greater awareness and availability of treatment (de Graaf & Carmichael, 2019).

While it is beyond the scope of this paper to detail the different theories regarding how and why gender develops (psychoanalytic theory, cognitive-developmental theory, social cognitive theory, or gender schema theory, to name a few), most theorists and researchers concur that gender develops between the ages of 1.5 and 3 years of age (e.g., Baldwin & Moses, 1996;

Ehrensaft, 2016). In scientific and medical circles, there is a reluctance to trust that transgender children know their gender, and assumptions abound regarding the gender confusion of these children (McHugh, 2016; Zucker et al., 1999, as cited in Olson et al., 2015). In order to investigate the gender cognition of prepubescent, socially-transitioned transgender children, Olson et al. (2015) compared a group of 5 to 12 year-old transgender children to two cohorts of age-matched cisgender peers with regards to their understanding of their gender. Employing implicit and explicit measures, they found no difference between the transgender children and the two control groups in terms of how the children perceived their gender and demonstrated gender preferences. That is, prepubescent transgender children know and understand their gender as certainly and as soundly as prepubescent cisgender children (Olson et al., 2015).

Children and youth identify their genders in a multitude of ways that traverse the gender spectrum (Newhook et al., 2018b; Pyne, 2012). De Graaf and Carmichael (2019) contend that although prepubescent gender diverse children most often identify their gender in a binary fashion and express their gender in stereotypical ways, some young people express their gender in ways that challenge expectations typically associated with their gender identity. That is, children may insist that they are “the other” gender (meaning boy or girl) than the gender they were assigned at birth. Some gender expansive children may feel distressed because their bodies do not align with their gender identity, while other children may not have issues with their bodies but may insist upon an expansive gender expression, typically an expression matching “the other” gender (Reilly et al., 2019). Without a doubt, there is no one narrative that captures the range of experiences of gender diverse children.

Some gender diverse children may experience gender dysphoria, a sense of distress related to not identifying with the gender they were assigned at birth (Reilly et al., 2019). In

addition to the discomfort related to the incongruence between one's body and one's internally-felt sense of gender, there is a growing consensus that the suffering associated with gender dysphoria in children, as in adolescents and adults, is due, in large part, to the suppression and non-recognition of one's authentic gender identity (Ehrensaft et al., 2018). That is, many gender diverse children experience distress if this crucial aspect of their self-concept is not witnessed and mirrored⁵ back to them by family, friends and community. In addition to a lack of recognition and acceptance, the experience of minority stressors such as exclusion and discrimination during childhood has been reported to increase the likelihood of substance abuse, risky behaviours, post-traumatic stress disorder, depression, anxiety, and suicidality (Bockting et al., 2013; Pflum et al., 2015; Testa et al., 2015). Conversely, there is mounting evidence that providing gender diverse children and youth with supportive environments and exposing them to people who affirm their gender identity will have a positive effect on their mental health outcomes (Katz-Wise et al., 2018; Olson et al., 2016; Ryan et al., 2010; Travers et al., 2012).

Psychological Treatment of Gender Diverse Children

The development of sex differences and gender identity has long intrigued researchers and psychologists interested in human behaviour. Since the early 1900's, psychologists have constructed models of gender identity development in an attempt to explain the processes by which individuals relate to the conceptions of gender in their social contexts, including how individuals conceive of themselves as gendered beings and adopt gender-differentiated behaviours (e.g., Bem, 1981; Bussey & Bandura, 1999; Freud, 1927; Horney, 1935; Kohlberg, 1966; Martin et al., 2002). Recently, guidelines for treatment have begun to include considerations for gender diverse youth (e.g., Coleman et al., 2012), although no agreement yet

⁵ Gormley (2008) explains the mirror metaphor as the real and/or imagined reflections of ourselves that we react to as we experience ourselves through relationships with others.

exists among experts on appropriate treatment for prepubescent children (Keo-Meier & Ehrensaft, 2018). A review of the current literature on gender diverse children reveals two main approaches: pathologizing and affirming.

Pathologizing Approaches

Historically, a pathologizing approach to the treatment of gender diverse children has predominated in modern Western culture. Pathologizing approaches primarily adhere to a binary model of gender wherein gender is fixed and determined through biology. Consequently, any gender diversity beyond the binary, including any incongruence between assigned sex and gender identity, and any expression of gender that does not conform to societal and cultural gender expectations is primarily regarded as a problem that requires treatment and resolution. Successful treatment outcomes for this approach involve reducing the incongruence between assigned sex and gender expression or gender identity, such that problematic gender feelings desist prior to adolescence and adulthood (Zucker, 2008). The most common treatment in this approach is known as conversion therapy, or reparative therapy, which focuses on changing or repairing a child's cross-gender feelings and behaviours to ones that are more congruent with what society expects based on that child's anatomical sex. Although adherence to a pathologizing approach to gender diverse children is decreasing in popularity, moving from pathology and treatment to affirmation (Pyne, 2014), a few scholars remain advocates of a pathologizing orientation. In Canada, the main proponent of this approach has been Kenneth Zucker, hence, his approach will be reviewed here.

Zucker (2008) has advocated for a program that incorporates therapy interventions designed for parent(s) and child, paired with treatment of the child's gender dysphoria in the natural environment, which refers to the methods that parents are encouraged to employ in order

to promote change in the child's daily life. Following this approach, parents are encouraged to limit their child's cross-gender behaviour, such as curbing the child's exposure to toys that are commonly associated with the other binary gender. Additionally, Zucker (2008) recommends limiting play time with peers of the other binary sex, and maintains that facilitating same-sex peer relations in the day-to-day environment can serve to assist gender diverse children in becoming more comfortable with their assigned gender.

Thus, in the pathologizing approach, parents of gender diverse children are laden with the arduous ask of policing and accounting for their child's gender expression. Zucker (2008) holds that if parents do not set limits on their child's cross-gender behaviours, they are tolerating, reinforcing, and even encouraging said behaviours. Thus, according to this approach, parents must be diligent in moderating and limiting their child's cross-gender behaviour on a daily basis. In tandem with managing and restricting their child's cross-gender behaviours, parents are expected to encourage gender neutral or gender typical behaviours. Finally, this model urges parents to situate these interventions in the wider context of open dialogue with their child about gender issues. That is, Zucker (2008) encourages parents to talk to their child about being confused or unhappy about their gender, and at the same time urges parents to be candid with the child about the concerns that they, as parents, have about their child's gender identity.

Along with parental interventions, Zucker (2008) advocates therapy sessions for the parent(s) and child. Therapy sessions with the parent(s) focus on the implementation of these interventions in the day-to-day setting. In this pathologizing approach, psychotherapy for gender diverse children emphasizes understanding the child's experience of their gender identity. Children are asked to make meaning of their cross-gender behaviour in terms of it being a "fantasy solution" and they are aided in a process of confronting their cognitive gender

confusion, rigid gender schemas, idealization of the opposite sex, and devaluation of their own sex (Zucker, 2008). Thus, this approach attempts to alter the child's gender identity so that it is consistent with their sex assigned at birth, assuming that this change will make them feel happier or more valued.

The pathologizing approach advocated by Zucker is controversial, as it reinforces the idea that sex and gender are inseparable and innately binary. Reparative therapy has also been criticized for reinforcing shame in children whose gender identity does not match their biological sex (Ehrensaft, 2012). Additionally, this approach removes any agency of the child with regards to their own body, and turns therapists and parents into "gender police" (Hill et al., 2007, p. 70). Zucker's approach to treatment suggests that lenient parents may even be implicated in their child's cross-gender behaviour by allowing such expression in their children. Proponents of reparative therapy reason that providing early intervention of this kind can reduce the chances of gender diversity in adolescence and adulthood, thus reducing bullying and ostracism from peers, which in turn will increase wellbeing (Zucker, 1990; Zucker & Bradley, 1995). There remains, however, a paucity of research supporting the idea that reparative therapy is successful in helping transgender children accept their biological sex and corresponding assigned gender (Cohen-Kettenis & Pflafflin, 2003; Hill et al., 2007), amid mounting evidence that this approach causes harm (Ehrensaft, 2011a; Green et al., 2020; Lev, 2005; Rafferty, 2018; Wallace & Russell, 2013; Coleman et al., 2012).

Affirming Approaches

In contrast to an approach that pathologizes gender diversity in children, a growing body of literature and increasing consensus amongst experts supports an approach that affirms gender diversity in children (Ehrensaft et al., 2018; Hidalgo et al., 2013; Malpas, 2011; Pyne, 2014). In

contrast to pathologizing approaches, affirmative models, such as the one outlined by Hidalgo et al. (2013), hold that gender is not binary, and that variations in gender are normal expressions of healthy gender development. The model advanced by these authors posits that (a) biology, (b) development and socialization, and (c) culture and context influence every individual's sense of themselves as a gendered being. As such, these authors argue that gender expression is diverse, and varies across cultures. Furthermore, they suggest that gender is fluid, and may change over time. According to their model, gender health is the opportunity for a child to live and express, without restriction or fear of rejection, whatever gender they experience as most genuine and authentic (Hidalgo et al., 2013). Where pathology exists for gender diverse children, it predominantly stems from narrow socio-cultural expectations resulting in societal attitudes and oppressive acts of transphobia⁶, cis-sexism⁷, and genderism⁸ (see footnote and Appendix A for definitions). Proponents of an affirmative approach hold that accepting, destigmatizing, and normalizing the experiences of gender diverse children increases their sense of well-being and optimizes their development (Malpas, 2011; Hidalgo et al., 2013).

Drawing on early notions of Cooley's (1902) looking-glass self, symbolic interactionist and social constructivist theorists conceptualize the self (identity) and society as being created and maintained through social interaction (Blumer, 1937; Stryker, 2002) and reflected appraisals (Rosenberg, 1986). That is, our self-concept is influenced by our perceptions of how others view us (Wallace & Tice, 2012). Thus, in part, identity is formed and informed through the relational process of social exchange. Parents and caregivers are usually the figures most present during the

⁶ Transphobia refers to animosity, hatred or dislike of transgender or gender expansive individuals that is frequently exhibited in the form of bias and prejudice (PFLAG, 2021).

⁷ Cis-sexism refers to a system of oppression that includes prejudice, stereotyping, and/or discrimination on the basis of sex, specifically towards transgender and gender-expansive people (PFLAG, 2021).

⁸ Genderism refers to the system of culturally-informed beliefs reinforcing the idea that gender is binary (boy/girl, man/woman) and determined by binary biological sex characteristics (male/female) (Hill & Willoughby, 2005).

formative years of a person's life and thus, these relationships are particularly salient for development of a sense of self (Bronfenbrenner, 2005).

One aspect of self-concept, gender identity, begins to develop in childhood and continues through adolescence, a time when the family unit is quite central to the young person's life. Thus, recognition and acceptance of all gender identities and expressions is central to an affirmative approach to treatment. Mounting evidence suggests that family support is crucial for the psychosocial well-being of gender diverse youth, reinforcing the idea that full acceptance of gender diversity is positively associated with increased self-esteem, increased social support, and overall health in early adulthood (Ryan et al., 2010). Furthermore, family acceptance of gender diversity during adolescence is associated with improved mental health outcomes, including decreased depressive symptomology, higher self-esteem, and increased life satisfaction (Travers et al., 2012). Conversely, children who receive negative messaging about their core identities, including their gender identities, are likely to experience a lasting sense of shame, and incur attachment ruptures with caregivers (Ehrensaft et al., 2018; Wallace & Russell, 2013). Moreover, there is no evidence that gender diversity in children and youths inherently negatively affects their mental health. For example, Durwood, et al., (2017) compared the mental health of socially transitioned children aged 3 to 12 with a group of age- and gender-matched peers. They found that socially transitioned children who were supported in their gender identities exhibited similar levels of symptoms of depression, and only slightly elevated symptoms of anxiety, relative to the control group of age- and gender-matched cisgender peers.

Providing children with environments that support an authentic gender identity and expression outside of the family environment is another important aspect of the affirmative approach. Outside of home, school is the place where most children spend a great deal of time

and where the development and maintenance of a sense of self continues through abundant social interaction. Experiences at school can significantly bolster or diminish a child's gendered sense of self (Brill & Pepper, 2008). Moreover, children require a secure and stable environment to be able to do their best learning (Brill & Pepper, 2008). Although there is great variability regarding experiences of peer acceptance or rejection and the resources that gender diverse children may draw on to manage social challenges (Menvielle, 2012), the literature demonstrates that gender diverse children and youth are often excluded and harassed by their peers (Cohen-Kettenis et al., 2003; McGuire et al., 2010; Wyss, 2004; Zucker & Bradley, 1995). Additionally, D'Augelli, et al. (2006) have shown that verbal attacks aimed at children with atypical gender presentation may begin as early as six years of age, and physical attacks may occur as early as age eight.

Whereas the pathologizing approach calls for interventions to help children conform to societal expectations of gender, affirming approaches advocate for full acceptance of the gender diverse child, and aim to adapt environments (e.g., family, school, and community) to help children to thrive in their chosen gender (Menvielle, 2012). Parents who have affirmed their child's gender diversity at home are tasked with the enormous job of both protecting and supporting their child as they move into potentially less-accepting environments. Regarding educational institutions, Brill and Pepper (2008) recommend that parents preventatively address concerns regarding the school environment, to ensure that their child's physical and emotional well-being will be protected and supported. That is, parents, in conjunction with their child, must determine the best way for their child to present in public, including at school. Proactive actions may include informing administration and teachers about their child's gender and their expectations of the school environment, as well as providing educational resources and training opportunities for school staff (Brill & Pepper, 2008).

For some gender diverse children, lack of recognition of their authentic gender is extremely distressing (Wallace & Russell, 2013). Increasingly, proponents of an affirmative approach suggest that for children who experience high levels of gender dysphoria, a social transition, tailored to the needs of the child, be considered a necessary treatment for pre-pubescent children who are asserting a gender other than the one assigned at birth, (e.g., Ehrensaft et al., 2018). A social transition concerns changing the ways in which one socially expresses one's gender from that assigned at birth to a more authentic gender expression (Ehrensaft et al., 2018). This process may consist of a change of name, pronoun, and a shift in gender presentation. For individuals who experience gender dysphoria, social transition may relieve some of the sense of distress caused by the incongruence between one's gender identity and sex/gender assigned at birth. Importantly, it is an appeal to others to respect one's asserted gender, rather than the gender that was assigned at birth (Ehrensaft et al., 2018). For children who experience high levels of gender dysphoria, social transition provides a relatively reversible way to live their authentic gender identity and to have that identity affirmed in the social realm. Necessarily, the process of social transition must be supported and facilitated by parents and guardians of gender diverse children.

Regardless of whether a pathologizing or an affirming approach is advocated, parents and guardians of gender diverse children are highly implicated in treatment options for their child, as they are generally the most significant and present forces in a child's early life (Bronfenbrenner, 2005). In pathologizing approaches, parents are tasked with stamping out gendered behaviours that are considered to be undesirable in their child. In affirming approaches, the work of negotiating adaptations for relationships and environments in and outside of the family unit is carried out by caregivers advocating on behalf of their gender diverse child. Moreover, family

members of gender diverse children must also come to terms with their own process of identity change and the alteration of the family unit, as well as the gender shift of the child, ideas which will be explored in the following section.

Transgender Identities in Familial Context

As with most of the research on transgender, non-binary, and gender diverse individuals, much of the relational literature has concentrated on the transitioning and coming out of adult transgender family members. While the majority of this body of literature has primarily attended to an adult family system, many of the emergent themes may be transferred to the transition of a family member at any age. Recently, the relational experiences of families with gender diverse children and youth have become an area of interest in research, however, there remains scant research about transgender and non-binary parents raising gender diverse children. The literature reviewed in the following sections therefore reflects, for the most part, the experiences of cis-gender caregivers and parents.

The Process of Family Acceptance and Adjustment

While the process of self-acceptance and adjustment may be tremendous for gender diverse individuals, family members also go through a unique process of coming to terms with a change in their own identities and relationships (Bockting & Coleman, 1992; Hill et al. 2010; Lev 2004; MacNish & Gold-Peifer, 2011). Some researchers have proposed that family members pass through different stages when a loved one comes out as transgender. For instance, Emerson (1996) asserted that when family members become aware of the transgender identity or behaviour of another family member, they progress through a series of stages, similar to the stages of grief suggested by Kubler-Ross (1969): (a) denial, (b) anger, (c) bargaining, (d) depression, and (e) acceptance. Emerson (1996) noted that progression through these stages is

not linear, that stages often overlap, and may be revisited. Moreover, each member of a family may negotiate the stages differently, based on their individual experience.

Similar to Emerson's stages of adjustment, the family emergence model proposed by Lev (2004) describes an adaptive process that includes personal and interpersonal developmental practices in relation to the emerging transgender identity of a family member. Lev's model references romantic couples where one member emerges as trans. Many of the stages, however, are transferable to other familial relationships, such as that of a parent and child. The four stages included in Lev's model of emergence include: (a) discovery and disclosure, (b) turmoil, (c) negotiation, and (d) balance. The first stage of discovery and disclosure is often marked for family members by a sense of shock, and possibly betrayal by the person they thought they knew. In the period following discovery and disclosure, the family may experience an increase in conflict and tension. The negotiation stage begins with the recognition that the transgender individual's gender identity is not just a phase, and that the change will need to be addressed. During the negotiation process, it is common for families to decide what kinds of changes will occur (e.g., will the person be called a different name, will they disclose the identity outside the family, etc.). Lastly, balance refers to the stage where the family is no longer in turmoil, and though a permanent solution may not have been negotiated, many large issues have been successfully resolved. During this final stage, the transgender individual is re-integrated into regular family life (Lev, 2004). It is not uncommon for family members to be unwilling participants of the developmental process of emergence, as they may feel coerced into coping with another person's gender identity issues. However, Lev (2004) proposes that family members who can move through this challenging lifecycle transition and achieve balance often find satisfaction and fulfillment in family life.

The narrative inherent in both of these models is one where the emergence of a transgender identity within the family is problematic, and something that family members must learn to tolerate. This discourse assumes a very narrow view of the ways in which family adjust to the discovery of the gender identity of a transgender family member. Zamboni (2006) suggests that the models lack an initial latency stage, reflecting a period of time within the family where the transgender individual's identity is not acknowledged within the family. Arguably, other stages and narratives exist.

The models proposed by Emerson (1996) and Lev (2004) are perhaps more reflective of a past societal context. In the last two decades, transgender individuals have become more socially visible as advocacy groups educate the public about gender identity, the Internet provides easy access to information, media portrayals of transgender characters have become more realistic, and well-known personalities now openly identify as trans. While it is undeniable that transgender people and their families are still impacted by stigma, discrimination, and transphobia, more varied experiences of transgender individuals and their families may exist today than are represented by older models.

In addition to the possibility that family members may have varied reactions and pass through different stages of adjustment in response to an individual emerging as gender diverse, there is also the issue that both models are predominantly unidirectional. That is, both models begin with family members discovering the gender identity of a loved one, and proceed to account for the reactions of family members only. The models fail to recognize the relational nature of the family system. Far greater than a collection of individuals who are related to one another, family represents a complex combination of parts such that each individual member can only be fully understood in relation to the whole (Smith & Hamon, 2012). Without a doubt,

when the gender identity of one family member changes, it creates a ripple effect within the entire family system. Each individual's experience affects the family system, and the family system influences each individual's personal experience in an interdependent and dynamic manner (Becvar & Becvar, 1993).

As such, some researchers have moved away from the stage model of family acceptance, to propose that a more complex interplay of shifting identities and relationships in families occurs when a family member's gender changes. These scholars argue that a change in gender identity and or expression in one person can initiate a shift in the relational realm. That is, a shift in gender identity and/or expression, such as a change of name, pronoun use, appearance, or verbal and non-verbal communication patterns may also initiate changes in the relationships of the transgender person (Burkitt, 1991). Family members may perceive the transgender individual as different, and as a result, may have difficulty understanding how the shift in gender influences their own sense of identity, and trouble finding ways to relate to the person's changed identity or expression (Norwood, 2012).

To explore the tensions that arise during the renegotiation of relationships between transgender individuals and their families, Norwood (2012) examined posts on online discussion forums. Using a relational dialectics approach, she analyzed 140 distinct posts from two websites that provide information and support to transgender individuals and their families. All analyzed posts were found in topic threads related to family issues and were written by transgender individuals or family members of transgender individuals, including partners, siblings, and parents.

Norwood (2012) found three distinct points of tension during the relational renegotiation in the online community of transgender individuals and their families: (a) presence vs. absence,

(b) similarities vs. differences, and (c) support for self vs. support for other. The first site of tension, presence vs. absence, refers to the feelings of grief that some family members experience surrounding the loss of the transgender individual's former identity. This sense of loss is experienced as confusing: the transgender family member is still physically present, but their former identity is absent. Some participants' experience of grief prevented them from being able to support their transgender family member in their new gender identity. The second site of tension concerns similarities vs. differences in both the transgender individual's identity and in their relationships with family members. Norwood (2012) found that family members struggled to understand whether the transgender individual was the same person, a different person, or both. Similarly, transgender individuals were concerned about how to communicate to family members that they were simultaneously the same and different post-transition. The third tension reported by Norwood (2012) was characterized by support for self vs. support for other. Family members expressed wanting to unconditionally support the transgender individual, but due to their own moral, religious, or emotional issues, they were unable to do so. Similarly, transgender individuals wanted to help their family members understand and accept their identity and transition, but also felt the need to be self-focused (Norwood, 2012).

Further, Norwood (2012) demonstrated that a change in the gender identity of one family member necessitated a renegotiation of all family identities and relationships. This notion suggests that the three points of tension, presence vs. absence, sameness vs. difference, and self vs. other, are sites where the transgender individual and their family members struggle to make meaning with regards to how shifting identities impact familial relationships. Loss and grief were prevalent themes for family members, as well as concern about how a change in their loved one's gender identity would change the relationship. Norwood (2012) observed that the

ambiguous and often competing emotions and understandings of family members made it challenging for them to unconditionally support their transgender family member. These findings represent an attempt to understand the complex process of relational meaning making that follows a change in gender of a family member.

In a similar study, Whitley (2013) investigated how family members process the transition of a loved one who identifies as transgender. The study was based on observational as well as formal and informal interviews with individuals who were currently or formerly in a relationship with a transgender person, or who identified as an ally to the transgender community. Interview participants included mothers, fathers, siblings, partners, friends, and allies of transgender individuals. Themes that emerged with regard to how family members processed the change of their family member's gender identity included sexual orientation, social role, and religious identity.

Notably, the relational identities of family members in Whitley's (2013) study were transformed by the shifting gender identity of a loved one. For instance, parents felt as though they had to relinquish their identity as mother or father of a daughter and learn to relate differently to their newly masculine or feminine child. Family members noted that they had to adjust to a new set of social expectations due to the change in gender. In particular, parents were concerned with the gender socialization and gender roles that they had imparted to their children. They expressed confusion over how to relate to a transitioning child. Furthermore, family members reported feeling concerned that their relationship with the transgender individual would change due to a shift in the likes and dislikes of the transitioning person.

Whitley's (2013) findings suggest that family members of transgender individuals experience challenges in three main areas: understanding the new gender identity of the

transgender family member, understanding how that new identity impacts their own identity, and renegotiation of the relationship. Similar to the findings described by Norwood (2012), family members of transgender individuals expressed feeling confused about the changing gender identity of their relative, and felt uncertain about how to behave in relation to this new identity. Moreover, family members felt worried as to how this change in gender identity would impact their relationship with the person in question. Whitley's (2013) study extended the literature on the identity development of family members coming to terms with a relative's transgender status, and suggested that family members of transgender individuals face unique relational identity challenges.

Ehrensaft (2011b) offered insight into the intricate changes triggered in the family environment in response to a child's revelation that their gender is different from their sex/gender assigned at birth. Caregivers may not be able to accept this difference, which may result in gender diverse children experiencing hostility and discrimination in their home environment. Moreover, even if caregivers accept their child's gender diversity, they may feel incompetent to support and prepare them for the violence and prejudice they may face. Unlike racialized parents who can promote pride in their child regarding their shared racialized identity, cisgender caregivers are often puzzled about how to support their gender diverse child (Ehrensaft, 2011b).

Challenging these conceptualizations of the family process, Riggs and Bartholomaeus (2018) proposed a different understanding of the loss that parents experience. These authors conducted a survey of 60 cisgender parents of transgender children aged 6-16. Parents answered open-ended questions about their experiences within the school system and the types of support they had received from the school and from other families whose children attended the school.

The authors reported that not all parents experienced a sense of loss or grief as a result of discovering that their child was gender diverse. Further, they argued that normalizing this type of narrative may marginalize and place the blame of loss onto the transgender individual. Instead, they proposed that the experiences of cisgender parents raising transgender children within the broader context of cisgenderism results in a lack of certitude. For example, within the school system, parents of transgender children lose certain sureties and privileges offered to parents of cisgender children, such as not having their child's gender called into question (Riggs & Bartholomaeus, 2018). Thus, Riggs and Bartholomaeus (2018) argue that transgender children do not create a loss for their guardians, but rather, the prevailing ideology of cisgenderism generates the losses of "invisible privileges" such as the certainty of assumed gender norms and acceptance of their child's gender identity and performance (p. 3).

Experiences of Parents and Caregivers Who Affirm their Gender Diverse Child

In her exploration of raising "girly boys" (children assigned male at birth who are gender expansive), Ehrensaft (2007) identified two types of parenting styles: obstructive and facilitative. The obstructive parenting approach views gender diversity in their child as a problem to be fixed, whereas the facilitative parenting approach advocates support of their child's diverse expression of gender. Ehrensaft (2007) notes that parents may desire to support their gender diverse child, and simultaneously feel the need to protect them from an unaccepting world. Thus, parents may act in ways that are both facilitative and obstructive. She advised that part of the process of becoming a facilitative parent requires a profound exploration and examination of one's own deeply held beliefs about gender, lest the gender biases of the caregiver(s) impose upon the gender development of their child (Ehrensaft, 2007). Unexamined beliefs about gender may result in parents experiencing cognitive dissonance, an inner conflict that occurs when newly

gathered data challenges old assumptions or views (Ehrensaft, 2011b). Thus, parents who view gender as binary and immutable may experience cognitive dissonance and have a difficult time understanding and supporting their gender diverse child. Undeniably, for some parents and caregivers, this sense of cognitive dissonance is overwhelming, resulting in gender diverse children and youth suffering abuse, harassment, and rejection from the very individuals who are meant to offer them protection and support. Additionally, Ehrensaft (2011b) notes that gender diverse children afford parents and caregivers the invaluable opportunity to confront their own gender biases. She suggests that parents who work through their sense of cognitive dissonance and who are able to resolve their often deeply-rooted genderist and transphobic beliefs are able to accompany and support their child's gender journey.

In an effort to better understand how parents experience the regulatory forces of a rigid binary system of gender, Rahilly (2015) interviewed 24 parents of 16 gender diverse children. She found that parents developed several strategies through which they increased their understanding and awareness of the hegemonic narrative of gender as binary, and worked to include and accommodate their child's diverse gender in their interactions with others. Rahilly termed these practices: gender hedging, gender literacy, and playing along. The practice of gender hedging, which predominated prior to parents recognizing the possibility that their child may be gender-variant or transgender, refers to parental attempts to limit their child's gender non-conforming behaviours. Parents using this strategy negotiated ways for their child to remain just inside of binary gender norms in order to protect their child from negative attention. Gender hedging often marks an awakening for parents to the dominant belief systems about gender and this may begin a time of questioning as to how and if the gender binary should inform their parenting practices. In an attempt to find information about parenting a gender diverse child,

Rahilly (2015) found that parents often turned to the internet for answers, where they discovered trans-affirming narratives that challenged the binary gender system. At this stage, parents often let go of their attempts to limit their child's gender non-conforming behaviours (gender hedging) in favour of affirming gender diversity as a natural and healthy human experience. Gender literacy also involved helping their child develop vocabulary to talk about their gender diversity, preparing their child for the prejudice that they may face in the future, talking with other family members, as well as those in their larger communities, such as teachers and administrators at schools, about gender diversity. At the same time, parents recognized that it was not appropriate to challenge the binary system of gender in all contexts, and that it was sometimes more suitable to "play along" (Rahilly, p. 353). For instance, offering a lesson in gender diversity to people they would probably not see again was often assessed as inappropriate, and playing along in such situations also served to protect their child's comfort, privacy, and safety. Thus, parents developed a strategic understanding of the contexts in which to practice gender literacy and the contexts in which it was better to play along in an attempt to both affirm and protect their child (Rahilly, 2015).

Caregivers and parents who affirm their child's gender diversity and who commit to following their child's gender path often require different types of information and support than that which is readily available. Riley et al. (2011) surveyed the needs of parents who had raised or who were in the process of raising a gender diverse child and found that parents identified needs related to obtaining accurate information, securing appropriate professional and peer support for themselves and their child, and developing parenting strategies. A common grievance of parents and guardians of gender diverse children relates to the difficulty of finding accurate and up-to-date knowledge to support them in making decisions about how best to raise their

gender diverse child (Pullen Sansfaçon et al., 2015; Riley et al., 2013). Additionally, parents report difficulty accessing appropriate treatment for themselves and their child. For instance, it is well documented that mental health and social service professionals, as well as many doctors, do not possess the requisite knowledge, or positive regard, that would allow them to provide affirming care to gender diverse children and their families (Bauer et al., 2009; Grey et al., 2016; Menvielle & Tuerk, 2002; Minter & Keisling, 2010; Kuvalanka et al., 2014; Pullen Sansfaçon et al., 2015; Schimmel-Bristow et al., 2018).

Schools offer another opportunity for gender diverse children to be supported in their identities. Most guardians of young children send their child to school with the understanding that schools represent a safe place for children to learn and grow. The literature on gender diverse children, however, points to shortcomings in the ways that gender diverse children and their families are included and supported in schools. Research reveals that gender diverse young people are harassed at school and may experience difficulties with peer relationships more often than cis-gender children and youth (Cohen-Kettenis et al., 2003; McGuire et al., 2010). Moreover, school norms and policies, such as gender-segregated activities, gendered bathrooms, and gendered school uniforms often exclude gender diverse children (e.g., Kuvalanka et al., 2014; Pullen Sansfaçon et al., 2015). School administrators and teachers, however, are often not equipped with the necessary knowledge or assistance to be able to include and support gender expansive children at school (Kosciw et al., 2018). This suggests that schools may be insecure and potentially dangerous spaces for gender diverse students. Faced with this potential insecurity, due to a lack of institutional support, families with children who have transitioned must grapple with difficult decisions concerning how to manage their child's gender identity at

school: to reveal the gender transition to teachers, staff, classmates, and parents, or to “go stealth” and conceal their child’s transgender history (Katz-Wise et al., 2017).

The existing research on raising a gender expansive child confirms that parents and guardians who support gender diverse children face additional parenting challenges as compared to parents raising children whose assigned gender is congruent with their gender identity and who express their gender in a typical manner. A lack of information results in uncertainty about how parents can best support their gender diverse children. The loss of institutional support results in parents having to navigate unthoughtful and at times transphobic systems in order to ensure that their child be afforded the same or similar resources as other children. As parents witness their child having to forge their way through spaces and relationships that are exclusive to non-gender diverse individuals, parents themselves are often stigmatized and face loss of community due to supporting their child’s gender diversity (Gray et al., 2016; Kuvalanka et al. 2014; Pullen Sansfaçon et al., 2015).

Conclusion

The narrative associated with gender expansive children and their families is itself in transition. Historically, transgender individuals and individuals whose gender expression challenges gender norms have been heavily pathologized as mentally ill deviants requiring treatment to be fixed. For many years, gender expansive children faced similar assessments resulting in harmful treatments that attempted to repair their very sense of self. More recently, however, many researchers and psychologists have reoriented treatment of gender diverse children and their families towards an affirmative approach. This shifting narrative towards embracing the diversity of the gendered human experience can be gleaned through shifts in

language, as we move away from terms like gender deviant or gender non-conforming to terms such as gender expansive and gender creative.

Parents and guardians of gender diverse children are often greatly involved in their child's gender journey. Mothers have been blamed for encouraging gender diversity in their children (Johnson & Benson, 2014), and parents and caregivers are highly implicated in both pathologizing and affirming treatment approaches. Parents and guardians who affirm their gender expansive child must work through their own gender biases and process the changes to their own sense of self associated with their child's gender identity shift. Additionally, affirmative parents and guardians often perform an extensive amount of labour to ensure that their child has access to the resources that should be available to all children, such as knowledgeable and respectful medical, psychological, and social services, including a safe and inclusive school environment. As affirming caregivers advocate for their children's health and safety, some may face negative reactions or even loss of their family, friends, or social community due to their parenting choices.

The literature reviewed in this chapter represents some of the first explorations of the experiences of family members of transgender individuals. Importantly, these studies capture the relational nature of the process of coming to terms with a relative's shift in gender identity and illuminate a much more complex and interconnected process of family in transition. Therefore, a shift in the gender identity of one family member concerns the identities of close family members and may transform the family system itself. While it is increasingly evident that these relational processes evolve over time, the majority of studies that attend to the experiences of parents who affirm their gender diverse children are often retrospective in nature. Raising a child, however, is a relational and developmental process that unfolds over time. In order to

obtain a more complex understanding of the developmental nature of the phenomenon, an approach that attends to the unfolding of experiences and relationships over time is required. Thus, the goal of this research project was to better understand the experiences of parents who support and facilitate their child's gender diversity across time and space. This objective was achieved through a systematic analysis of four parents' narratives of their daily lived experience, as described in their blogs.

Research Questions

To contribute to the growing literature, and to further understand the experiences of raising a gender diverse child, the current project seeks to answer the following questions through the analysis of blogs written by parents who affirm their gender diverse children:

1. What are the experiences over time of parents who are affirmatively raising a gender diverse child?
2. What is the function of online blogging for parents who blog about supportively raising their gender diverse child?

Researcher Assumptions

When a transgender child reveals their authentic gender, I believe that it initiates a complex process for all members of the child's immediate family. I expect that the family transition is an iterative process, wherein the individual development of each family member influences the development of other family members, as well as the family system, offering opportunities for growth at the individual and relational levels. At the same time, I believe that within the North American context, sufficient support and security is not available to parents of gender diverse children. That is, I think that parents who affirm their child's gender diversity face systemic and institutional barriers to accessing adequate information, competent care, and

support for their child, equivalent to that which is afforded cisgender children and their parents.

I assume that due to the lack of resources, visibility and representation of other gender affirming families, parents who blog about affirmatively raising a gender diverse child are seeking to create community, share resources and increase visibility of the needs of gender diverse children and their families.

Chapter 3: Theoretical Frameworks and Method

This study employed a qualitative design in order to understand the experiences of parents who are affirmatively raising a gender diverse child, and to facilitate a deeper understanding of the function of blogging about that experience. The following chapter outlines the feminist social constructionist epistemological philosophy that guided this research and explains the rationale for choosing this epistemological framework. Next, the methodology of narrative inquiry that was selected for this study is described and the links between the epistemic framework and methodology of narrative inquiry are examined. The researcher's subjective stance is discussed in an attempt to illuminate the biases and assumptions that influenced this study. Finally, the methods used to obtain and analyze the data are detailed, with discussion of the benefits and challenges of using blogs as data sources. The chapter concludes with a description of how trustworthiness and rigour were ensured.

Epistemology

Epistemology refers to the philosophy of the study and acquisition of knowledge, placing particular emphasis on the nature of the relationship between the would-be-knower (the researcher) and the knower (the research participant; Guba & Lincoln, 2005; Ponterotto, 2005). This study employed a feminist social constructionist (FSC) epistemology. FSC is an anti-oppressive epistemological framework for which the tenets include the notions that multiple realities exist, that knowledge is co-constructed, and that gender is performative. Each of these tenets will be explained in detail below, followed by a rationale for the use of an FSC framework to examine the experiences of parents who blog about affirmatively raising their gender diverse child.

Whereas positivist epistemologies hold that an external world exists independent of interpretation and that it can be known through objective measurement, thus removing the subjectivity of the would-be-knower (Sprague & Kobryniewicz, 1999), FSC is a relativistic theory of knowledge that holds that the external world can only be known through representation and interpretation (Raskin, 2002). When working from an FSC epistemology, it is assumed that individuals use language and make meaning out of their experiences in personal and idiosyncratic ways, influenced by their position in both local and global contexts (Furman et al., 2003). From this perspective, multiple, equally valid realities exist (Creswell, 2007; Haverkamp & Young, 2007; Ponterotto, 2005).

In addition to the assumption of the existence of multiple realities, scholars who espouse an FSC epistemological stance believe that knowledge (or the interpretation of the external world) is bound by history and context, and is linguistically generated and reproduced, thus, is socially mediated (Chiari & Nuzzo, 1996, p.174 in Raskin, 2002). That is, shared functional meanings arise when two or more individuals interact within a given context and time frame (Raskin, 2002). FSC embraces the idea that individuals come to understand themselves and their worlds through relational processes with others and with the environment (Sprague, 2005). Thus, researchers working from an FSC epistemological stance believe that they are active participants in co-constructing meaning along with the research participant (Haverkamp & Young, 2007).

An additional underlying assumption of FSC is that gender is an action; it is something one does, rather than something one is (Sinacore & Enns, 2005). Traditionally, in Western culture, understandings of gender have rested on the notion that men and women differ based on their biological natures, and that masculinity and femininity are mutually exclusive (Bem, 1993). That is, masculinity and femininity have long been considered polar opposites; men are

masculine, and consequently, void of feminine traits, and vice versa. This understanding of gender, based on principles of biological essentialism, precludes the influence of social, cultural, and political locations on the understanding of gender. According to this traditional view, gender is something that is biologically inherent to an individual. Conversely, FSC theorists assert that gender is something that one performs, and that this performance is influenced by contexts, social locations, and relationships (Bohan, 1993). Thus, masculine and feminine identities are not fixed, nor are they fundamental; rather, they are flexible, fluid, and malleable. Specifically, Sinacore and Enns (2005) argue that the performance of gender (along with the performance of other social identities such as sexual orientation, social class, and race), is unstable, and is shaped, in particular, by shifting contexts and social power dynamics.

Accordingly, one of the most important assumptions underlying FSC is that it is anti-oppressive. Researchers working from an FSC epistemology attend not only to local production of identity, but also critically examine the broader, temporally situated contexts of society, morality, economy, and politics in order to understand how certain power structures are maintained and certain realities privileged over others (Gergen, 1985). FSC researchers attempt to uncover and challenge oppressive dominant realities through understanding the experiences of those who are otherwise marginalized by dominant power structures (Haverkamp & Young, 2007). In this vein, one of the explicit goals of FSC researchers is to deconstruct the discourses that create and sustain unequal power relations. That is, FSC researchers attempt to disassemble texts in order to see how they are organized to produce a particular narrative (Burr, 1995). Informed by the theories of Foucault (1993) and Derrida (1976), discourse analysis mirrors the tenets of FSC in that it reflects the notion that individuals experience themselves and events

through socially and discursively constructed realities (Burr, 1995). Further, it aims to establish and describe dominant power structures and implications.

The assumptions that form the basis of FSC epistemology are particularly appropriate to this study of the experiences of parents who blog about affirmatively raising a gender diverse child. Firstly, the tenet of inclusion of and emphasis on multiple realities allows the experiences of these parents, detailed through the blogs analyzed in this study, to contribute unique and valuable knowledge which will enrich the existing understanding of experiences of parents affirmatively raising a gender diverse child. Secondly, the FSC assumption that knowledge is co-created is also relevant to this project, as it recognizes knowledge creation, and thus identity formation, to be a relational process. Accordingly, the researcher acknowledges that the data have been interpreted through her own individual lens and positionality, and that the data has, in a sense, been transformed through the process of analysis. Further, the underlying assumption of FSC epistemology that gender is performative is especially pertinent to this study. This epistemological stance problematizes the notion that gender is linked to anatomy and inherent in the body. The very notion of gender diversity contradicts historical, Western assumptions about gender. Thus, the understanding that gender is an action that can be performed in innumerable, unique, and creative ways is essential to the aims of this research project. Lastly, from an FSC epistemological stance, gender is understood to be socially constructed, and as such, shaped over time by prevailing social and political value systems. This research aims to uncover and challenge the dominant and insidious systems of meaning that influence the experiences of parents who blog about affirmatively raising a gender diverse child. As the anti-oppressive practice of an FSC epistemological position challenges the dominant understandings of gender

and parenting, this framework makes it possible for new meanings and perspectives to be explored.

Methodology

A review of the existing research provided a broad understanding of parenting a gender diverse child, however, relatively little attention has been devoted to the experiences of parents who affirm their gender diverse child. This project aims to contribute to addressing this gap in the literature by employing a qualitative research design to examine the blogs of parents affirmatively raising a gender diverse child. Whereas quantitative research allows researchers to observe and describe causal associations in terms of numeric measurements, qualitative research aims to describe and confer meaning onto experience (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Polkinghorne, 2005). Moreover, Morrow (2007) holds that qualitative research methods are a valuable approach when attempting to understand the meaning that people make of their experiences. This project seeks to explore, over time, the experiences of parents who blog about affirmatively raising their gender diverse child and to investigate the function of blogging for these parents. Thus, a narrative qualitative research approach is particularly appropriate for addressing the research questions posed in this study.

Narrative Inquiry

Individuals shape their understanding of themselves, their relationships, and their experiences through the stories they tell. These stories, or narratives, enable individuals to interpret and make meaning out of their past, present, and future worlds. Narrative inquiry is thus a way of thinking about experience (Clandinin, 2006), while narrative methodology is the “study of experience as it is lived” (Clandinin & Rosiek, 2007, p. 69). Through narrative, individuals endeavor to give order to, make sense of, describe, and resolve the circumstances and events in

their lives. In this fashion, the stories that people tell are expressions of who they are in the world (Bamberg, 2012). A person's identity is thus composed and created through their experiences and the meaning conferred on those experiences (Dewey, 1938/1997; Connelly et al., 1997).

According to Clandinin and Rosiek (2007), who draw on a Deweyan (1938/1997) understanding of experience, narrative methodology attends to three dimensions simultaneously: temporality, sociality, and spatiality. These three dimensions, or "commonplaces", provide the conceptual framework of an inquiry (Clandinin & Rosiek, 2007, p. 69). The commonplace of temporality refers to the idea that events and people are in continual temporal transition. Experience leads to further experience, and the stories that people tell about their lives are not finite, but rather, make up part of the continuum of a lived life. Stories set in the past lead to present understandings and imagined futures (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Clandinin, 2006).

The second commonplace, sociality, refers to the notion that both personal and social conditions interact and influence experience. Personal conditions denote the feelings, hopes, desires, reactions, and character of the narrator and/or the inquirer, whereas social conditions refer to the surrounding factors and forces of the environment (Clandinin & Rosiek, 2007). Attention to personal and social contexts reflects the notion that people are constantly in relation with themselves and with others (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Such interactions influence how people draw personal meaning from their experiences. The notion of sociality in narrative research also acknowledges and attends to the relationship between the researcher and the participant or data. Researchers bring their personal and social conditions to the table, and these contexts tint the lens through which we inquire and understand the experiences under study. Thus, when employing a narrative approach, it is important to reflect upon and give an account of where the researcher stands in relation to the inquiry and the participants (Clandinin & Rosiek,

2007).

The third commonplace of narrative inquiry, spatiality, refers to the actual physical setting in which experience occurs. This concept acknowledges the impact of place on experience and encourages narrative inquirers to be aware of how a shift in place can influence experience as well as the storying of experience (Clandinin & Rosiek, 2007). When undertaking an inquiry, the practice of simultaneously attending to temporality, sociality, and spatiality differentiates narrative methodology from other qualitative methodologies (Clandinin & Rosiek, 2007). Focusing on these three commonplaces emphasizes the relational nature of the narrative inquiry paradigm. The narrator is in relation to past, present, and future selves, to other actors in their story, and to the environments and places in which their stories take place. At the same time, the narrator and researcher are in relation with one another as they co-construct the experiences created through the process of relational narrative inquiry (Clandinin, 2006).

For the purposes of this study, the researcher is interested in the experiences of parents affirmatively raising a gender diverse child, as expressed through their personal blogs. Parenting a child is not a static, immutable process, but rather a relational one in which identities and experiences evolve over time and space. Employing a narrative approach allows for the development of identity and understanding of experience over time via the telling of a person's story. Notably, in this project, the stories are told in cyberspace, in blog post form, and in relation to an online audience. The three main dimensions of narrative inquiry—time, context, and place—will be attended to in the analysis of these parents' personal blog posts about raising their gender diverse children, allowing for an unfolding of daily experience across time.

The Relationship Between Methodology and Epistemology

Within the parameters of the current research project, it is evident that the foundations of narrative inquiry are aligned with the FSC epistemological position utilized in the study. The underlying assumption in a narrative approach, that realities are complicated and plural, is also consistent with an FSC epistemology. Additionally, both narrative inquiry and FSC emphasize the importance of situating knowledge and experience in context. The texts included in this study provide detailed accounts of raising a gender diverse child, and analysis will attend to contextual, temporal, and relational aspects of the narrative. The notion that knowledge is co-constructed is emphasized in FSC epistemology and is congruent with the principles of narrative inquiry. Within this study, it is acknowledged that the subjective stance of the researcher influences the reading of the narrative accounts of parents and in this sense, contributes to a new understanding of the analyzed texts. Finally, FSC research aims to challenge dominant meaning systems in an attempt to reduce oppression (Haverkamp & Young, 2007). By attending to the socio-political context in which these parents' stories are told, narrative inquiry can illuminate dominant meaning systems, and in this sense is congruent with the aims of an FSC epistemology.

The Subjective Stance of the Researcher

Feminist research paradigms emphasize the notion that just as research participants are located in social, relational and historical contexts that shape identities, so too are researchers (Acker et al., 1991). Indeed, one of the challenges faced by the feminist social constructionist researcher is to identify and contend with the power structures that are implicated in the researcher-participant relationship (Bloom, 1996; Lal, 2018; Wolf, 2018). Consequently, it is common for feminist qualitative researchers to engage in ongoing reflection of the researcher's own subject position in relation to those of the participants (Aranda, 2006; Denzin, 1994).

The present researcher identifies as a white, queer cisgender, able-bodied femme, living with chronic pain. I come from a middle-class background and am pursuing higher education in counselling psychology. As a psychologist-in-training, I have received specialized training and supervision while working with LGBTQ+ communities, and continue to work primarily within these communities, with adolescents, adults, and families. Through my clinical work I have had the opportunity to support both gender diverse adolescents and parents raising gender diverse children. Although I have experience working with gender diverse youth and their families, I am not a parent or guardian to a young person, nor have I ever been a primary caregiver to a child.

My outsider status of not being a parent may affect my ability to fully and accurately understand parents' narratives about raising a gender diverse child. In an attempt to check and balance my outsider status in this respect, I worked closely with my research supervisor who served as auditor to the process of data analysis, and who has had the experience of raising children. Through a reflexive process of journaling and discussion with my research supervisor, I have attempted to understand and illuminate my biases due to my outsider status of non-parent. It is my sincerest hope that in centering the narratives found in the blogs authored by parents who are raising gender diverse children that I have accurately represented the authors' experiences and amplified their voices.

Method

Procedure

Blogs as a Data Source

The data for this project were online texts in the form of web logs, more commonly known as blogs. Blogging emerged in the late 1990s as a new form of online communication and expression (Blood, 2002; Rosenberg, 2009). Although blogs are highly variable in subject

matter, purpose, and audience, the general format of blogs is relatively consistent. Typically, blogs are websites that are updated on a regular basis with archival entries called posts, which are usually organized in reverse-chronological order such that the newest content appears first (Herring et al., 2004; Nardi et al., 2004). Blog posts are typically dominated by text, but it is also not uncommon practice to embed graphics, audio, or video footage within the text (Blood, 2002; Scheidt, 2009). Some blogs are made available and discoverable to anyone on the web, while others require registration or passwords and are accessible to only a select audience. Individuals are motivated to blog for a wide variety of reasons, including documenting one's life, sharing opinions, expressing emotions, articulating ideas through writing, forming, and maintaining community forums or social networking, advertising/promoting, or as a creative outlet (Birnkranz & Przeworski, 2017; Nardi et al., 2004). Puschmann (2013) cites self-expression as a variable, yet central impetus to blog.

Fit for Qualitative Research. Blogs have been described as “archives of everyday life” (Hookway, 2017, p. 166). They are typically candid accounts of daily lived experience expressed through the author's voice, in which the author is free to construct their own meaning and prioritize and define their own narrative (Hookway, 2017). Many blogs are publicly accessible and thus, for the qualitative researcher, represent a low-cost way to collect biographical accounts of commonplace experiences while avoiding issues associated with other methods of data collection such as diaries or interviews (Hookway, 2017). For instance, blogs are unsullied by researcher interference, as their themes are prioritized by the authors' own narratives rather than being directed by the researcher's interview questions (Hine, 2013). Furthermore, blogs are usually maintained over time, thus presenting opportunities for longitudinal analysis (Snee, 2008). Additionally, in blogging there is usually a temporal proximity between living

experiences and discussing them (Toms & Duff, 2002), which potentially circumvents recall or reconstruction issues that can affect retrospective research (Verbrugge, 1980). Moreover, using blogs can connect researchers with groups that are otherwise difficult to access (Kozinets, 2015). Lastly, the use of blogs for qualitative research is a non-invasive approach (Lee, 2000) that requires little to no researcher intervention and thus represents an advantageous approach to data collection for the qualitative researcher.

Ethical Considerations for Using Blogs as Research Data. While using online blogs as a data source offers benefits, this approach also presents several ethical and procedural challenges. Most social sciences research requires researchers to obtain informed consent from human subjects prior to data collection, wherein participants agree to be involved in the research and approve of how their contribution will be used. This serves to protect the rights of the participant. The guidelines with regards to informed consent for online research, however, are not as clear (Hine, 2013). The literature on the use of online content as data sources in research explores two central issues: characterization of online content and privacy concerns (Bassett & O'Riordan, 2002; Eastham, 2011; Hookway, 2017; von Benzon, 2018; Wilkinson & Thelwall, 2000). The following two sections will explore each of these issues in more detail.

Characterization of Online Content. There is ongoing debate as to whether the use of online content as research data should be considered human subject research or whether the content can be treated as a form of cultural artefact. When considering blog contents as data, specifically, there is a question of whether they are more akin to interview data or to culturally produced objects such as newspaper opinion pieces or books (Hookway, 2017). The problem of how researchers understand and characterize internet texts such as blogs is an important query that will inform decisions about the research process and treatment of the authors of online texts.

One position in the debate is that authors of online texts used as data in research projects should be considered human subjects. Undergirding this position is the impulse to mitigate the risk of harm to participants. The risks associated with the use of blogs as data concern the possibility of increased visibility and attention to the blog, as well as the interpretation of blog content (Hookway, 2017; von Benzon, 2018). While categorizing the authors who publish in cyberspace as human subjects is an attempt to translate the protective norms and ethics of in-person social science research to an online context, some experts point out that this strategy may not achieve the desired effect (Bassett & O’Riordan, 2002; von Benzon, 2018). Positioning authors of online texts as human subjects runs the risk of conflating the author with their creation, rather than conceptualizing the internet as a space where users can “take control of the means of production” to produce cultural artefacts like blogs (Bassett & O’Riordan, 2002, p. 235). Similarly, von Benzon (2018) argues that it may behoove researchers to consider bloggers to be “agential actors” and “competent, independent, and cognizant producers of knowledge” rather than naïve subjects (p. 183). She posits that recognizing the production of cultural artefacts demonstrates appreciation for and recognition of content creators, rather than putting them in harm’s way.

Protecting producers of online artefacts by classifying them as human subjects may cause harm by detracting from the value of their cultural production. Bassett and O’Riordan (2002) point out that visibility and self-representation are possible through online publication, and that self-determination is crucial for members of certain populations (e.g., LGBTQ+ communities) whose lived experiences and identities are diminished and belittled by dominant societal narratives. These authors suggest that devaluing cultural production by considering authors and creators to be human subjects, and applying protective research norms such as anonymity and

disguise, can contribute to a sense of being marginalized and pathologized (Bassett & O'Riordan, 2002).

Asking permission from producers of online artefacts to use their content for the purposes of research can show respect for content creators. Wilkinson and Thelwall (2000), however, submit that seeking informed consent by contacting creators of cultural artefacts is a move towards involving these individuals in the research, in a sense generating a need for human subject categorization and its associated responsibilities. Some authors suggest that using online content in research is an unobtrusive means of collecting data (Kitchin, 2007; Lee, 2000), if research activities do not interfere with the state of the online site, community, or content (Kitchin, 2007). Kitchen (2007) also proposes that it is the act of directly contacting a creator of online content that produces a human research subject.

If, as some researchers suggest, online content should be characterized as a cultural artefact, this would negate the need for informed consent when using online content as a data source and would instead require consideration of the concepts of ownership and intellectual property (Bassett & O'Riordan, 2002; von Benzon, 2018). Blogs would thus be considered published creative works owned by their authors, invoking the idea of copyright. Indeed, von Benzon (2018) proposes that content creators be acknowledged as having purposefully published their work, and credited appropriately through citations, much as one would recognize the creators of other publications such as research articles.

Copyright law aims to balance the rights of individual creators with the rights of the public to access content. Within copyright law, there are provisions for use of copyrighted material without permission under the doctrines of fair use (in the United States) or fair dealing (in Canada). Because the blogs used for the present research project were authored by people

living in the United States, it is appropriate to apply the American standard of fair use, rather than the Canadian standard of fair dealing. Section 107 of the United States Copyright Act outlines four factors that determine whether use of a work is considered fair: a) purpose and character of use; b) nature of the work; c) portion used; and d) effect on value of the work (Copyright Act, 1976). Each of these considerations will be addressed in more detail below.

The first term, purpose and character of use, concerns how the copyrighted material will be used. The law distinguishes between use of a commercial nature and use for non-profit and educational objectives, stating that use of a work for purposes such as “criticism, comment, news reporting, teaching ... scholarship, or research” is not an infringement of copyright (Copyright Act, 1976). The second term, nature of the work, refers to certain characteristics (such as the factuality or inventiveness of a work) that are more likely to make a work eligible for use under the fair use doctrine. For instance, facts are not protected under copyright law, thus using factual works without permission is more likely to be considered fair use than fictional and creative works (Purdue Online Writing Lab, n.d.). Likewise, published works are more likely to be considered under the doctrine of fair use than unpublished works (Purdue Online Writing Lab, n.d.). The third term, portion used, refers to how much of the work is being reproduced. Using a smaller excerpt of a larger copyrighted work is more likely to be deemed fair use (Purdue Online Writing Lab, n.d.). The fourth term, effect on value of the work, evaluates the effect of the use on the current and future commercial or market value of the work (U.S. Copyright Office, n.d.). All four factors of the fair use doctrine are jointly considered when determining whether the use of a copyrighted work will be deemed fair.

Privacy. Blogs are sites where often very personal information about lived experience is recorded and stored in a public way, making blogs feel both public and private at the same time.

There are three main approaches to understanding the private/public nature of blogs and related use of online blogs as data sources: 1) blogs are located in the public domain, subverting the need for obtaining informed consent, and are fair game; 2) blog creators have an expectation of privacy, and thus their writing should be treated as private; and 3) the public/private nature of content is unclear, or the blog may simultaneously be both public and private and thus must be examined on a case-by-case basis (Hookway, 2017). While there are no firm rules, the Association of Internet Researchers (AoIR)⁹ offers aspirational guidelines for a case-by-case approach when using online texts in research (Markham & Buchanan, 2012). The AoIR caution that researchers must consider the risk of harm to authors and weigh whether privacy is implied via the venue or content, the availability of content, and whether the author is considered an adult (Markham & Buchanan, 2012). The British Psychological Society (BPS)¹⁰ has counselled that if no perception or expectation of privacy exists, then it is reasonable for online content to be used for research purposes without first obtaining informed consent (Hewson et al., 2017). The notion that online texts must be considered on a case-by-case basis is echoed by a number of other scholars, such as Bassett and O'Riordan (2002), who suggest that researchers must take into consideration any statements within the text about the intended audience.

Working from the assumption that a blog author deliberately designs their blog to be either private or public, Eastham (2011) maintains that researchers must respect the authors' intention of privacy when considering use of online text as data. When the blog is the only data source, and there is no interaction with the blog author, Eastham offers a useful framework of six attributes that can help researchers determine the author's intention as to the public or private

⁹ The AoIR is a member-based, academic association that promotes analytical and rigorous scholarship related to internet research, across disciplines.

¹⁰ The BPS is the body representing psychologists in the United Kingdom that promotes both excellent and ethical practice of the discipline.

nature of their blog. The first factor is whether the blog is indexed for search—that is, whether the blog can be found using an internet search engine. As this attribute means that anyone with internet access can search for and retrieve the blog, Eastham argues that this suggests it is intended to be public. On the other hand, if the blog is unsearchable, this may point to the author's intention that the blog be private (Eastham, 2011). The second attribute referenced by Eastham is whether the blog is limited to cache, indicating that the blog has been removed from the internet, which would signal an intention of privacy by the author. Thirdly, blog authors can demonstrate an intention of privacy by requiring a password or registration to access the blog. Eastham counsels that this indicates that the blog was intended for a select group of individuals, rather than for the public at large. Similarly, the fourth attribute concerns whether members of the public can comment on posts and whether the blog author has responded to reader comments. Just as newspaper editorials or letters to the editor are intended to be read by the public, Eastman argues, allowing comments and responding to them can also indicate that the blog author intends their writing for public consumption. The fifth attribute to consider is whether the author has enabled an RSS feed for their blog. Short for “Really Simple Syndication”, RSS feeds allow readers to subscribe to (follow) a blog or online magazine so that they are automatically notified about new posts or articles and can access the content in an easy-to-read format by email or through an RSS reader app (Teske Whitehead, 2020). Use of this feature by authors indicates their decision to allow automatic updates to readers of the blog when they post new content, making that content easily accessible. This ease of access to content seems to underlie Eastham's position that having an RSS feed suggests that the blog was intended for the public. The sixth and final attribute proposed by Eastham posits that an author's stated reasons for blogging

provide clues as to the private or public nature of the blog. For instance, sharing feelings and educating others requires a public venue and audience (Eastham, 2011).

Assessment of Blogs in the Current Project

This research study seeks to more deeply understand experiences of raising a gender diverse child, as well as to understand the role of blogging about these experiences. Choosing blogs as data for this qualitative research allowed the researcher to observe, in an unobtrusive manner, the unfolding of parents' experience over time and in context. Furthermore, the texts included in the study were generated by the blog authors without researcher influence, thus the words, topics, and themes in the blogs reflect the parents' priorities and journeys. Honouring the experience of parents by choosing to use blogs as data is especially pertinent when researching the experiences of caregivers of gender diverse children, who are often met with judgement and hostility, and questioned with regards to how they are choosing to support their child (e.g., Johnson & Benson, 2014).

The four blogs analyzed in this study were the sole source of data for this research project. Each blog was evaluated to determine the nature of intended privacy using Eastham's (2011) six criteria: a) indexed for search, b) limited to cache, c) password requirement, d) comments, e) RSS feed, f) reasons for blogging. In respect to attribute (a), all four blogs were indexed for search—that is, located in the public domain and able to be retrieved by a search engine (e.g., Google) using the title of the blog or key words as search terms. Furthermore, two of the blog authors included tags (e.g., “gender”, “social norms”, “blogging”, “parenting”) which optimize their blogs for search engines, permitting them to be found more easily by anyone searching with those key words. According to Eastham (2011), this indicates that the blog authors intend their blogs to be searchable and accessible to the public. Regarding attribute (b),

one inactive blog included a statement from the author directing readers to a link where they could still access all of the blog posts. While some of the blogs were no longer active at the time of analysis, none had been removed from the internet, nor were any blogs limited to cache. Regarding attribute (c), all four blogs studied were accessible without registration or a password, indicating that the blog authors did not intend to limit access to a circumscribed audience such as family and friends. Regarding attribute (d), all four blog authors had enabled reader comments on posts and had regularly engaged in replying to reader comments. Regarding attribute (e), only one blog had provided an RSS feed option, however, all four blog authors offered other easy ways for readers to follow the blog or contact the author. Three of the blogs were self-published via the WordPress platform, which permits readers to easily follow blogs of their choosing. The blog with an RSS feed option also provided a link for readers to share the blog with others. Another blog offered an email notification option so that readers could easily keep up with new blog posts. All four authors provided links permitting readers to easily repost blog entries on Twitter and Facebook, signifying a desire that their writing be shared with a wider public. Additionally, all four authors provided their email addresses as a way to be contacted by readers. Further, two blog authors provided links to their Facebook and Instagram accounts, encouraging interaction via social media. The ease of finding and engaging in reading, responding to, and sharing the content of these blogs seems to indicate that while the writing is personal, the authors intend their blogs to be public in nature. Lastly, regarding attribute (f), Eastham argues that blog authors' reasons for creating and maintaining their blogs can also provide clues as to their public or private nature. Although each of the authors shared different reasons for blogging, there were similarities between their objectives. All four blog authors seem to be motivated to build an online community through blogging. For example, one author posted "I blog as a way of making

my family visible and building support out in the world for others like us. I blog to create a closer-knit 'family'/community around us for the moms and our boy" ("Bloggng for LGBT Families", 2008, para. 6). Another motivation was educational in nature. Two of the blog authors created podcasts about parenting gender diverse children, which they promoted on their blogs. One blog author has written a memoir, and another has published several children's books about being gender diverse. Furthermore, two of the blog authors engage in advocacy and public speaking events about gender diverse children. As one author expressed:

I would like to reach as many people as I can with a message of acceptance for gender-nonconforming kids [...] Of course this means that I want to find more allies—but I also want to reach out to people who have never thought about the ideas I talk about on my blog pages. (Hoffman, 2010, December 9, para. 2)

Based on the guidelines provided by Eastham (2011), it is clear that the four blog authors made decisions indicating their intention for the blogs to be public. All four blogs are indexed for search, not limited to cache, not password protected, allow readers to comment, and provide an RSS feed or other ways to easily follow the blog. Moreover, the authors' main reasons for blogging—creating community and educational purposes—demand a public audience. Three of the four authors also publicize their other writing, podcasts or speaking engagements about their parenting experiences on their blog. Thus, through careful consideration, the four blogs were determined to be public in nature.

Having established that the blogs are meant to be public, at least according to the factors set forth by Eastham (2011), the issue of copyright must also be weighed, based on the four characteristics of the American standard of fair use: a) purpose and character of use, b) nature of the work, c) portion used, and d) effect on value of the work (Copyright Act, 1976). Regarding

the first characteristic, this study is not of a commercial nature and falls under the category of scholarship, which is considered acceptable under fair use. Regarding the second characteristic, blogs are considered to be artefacts of daily life and a record of experience, thus more fact-based than works of fiction, which is favourable for fair use. Regarding the third characteristic, select quotations from the blogs were chosen to be reproduced in this dissertation to illustrate themes that arose from content analysis. The portions of text reproduced herein are small, relative to the entirety of the blog, and thus more likely to be deemed fair use. Regarding the fourth and final characteristic, it is unlikely that use of the blogs as data for this study will negatively impact the current or potential future commercial or market value of the work, which would again support fair use. Three of the four authors have publicized their related endeavours (podcasts, books and speaking engagements) on their blogs, and have encouraged readers to engage with them on other social media platforms, indicating that they are actively trying to increase their visibility. Thus, it seems reasonable to conclude that if the blogs analyzed in this dissertation were to experience increased readership and visibility, this result would not be considered harmful but rather would be in line with the bloggers' own objectives.

The four authors of the online texts analyzed in this dissertation are considered to be competent, independent agents, producing and self-publishing their blogs in such a way that they are readily available and accessible to the public at large. These authors are deemed to have agency in this process, and thus are assumed to have been thoughtful in choosing to publish, publicize and maintain their blogs. The four blogs have provided a means for the authors to share their experiences of parenting and advocating for their gender diverse child, a position that is not always met with understanding and approval. Thus, the blogs may provide a platform for these parents to define and defend their positions and identities. Moreover, the blogs provide a means

of making these parents and their experiences more visible. Out of respect for the authors of the blogs, and in an attempt to raise and amplify their voices, direct quotes from the blogs have been used throughout the dissertation to accurately portray their experiences. Similarly, in honouring the value that these cultural artefacts hold, the authors will be quoted as one would reference any other scholarly work, as suggested by von Benzon (2018).

Data Collection

Prior to data collection, the ethics office at McGill University was contacted to inquire about obtaining ethical approval to study the experiences of parents affirmatively raising a gender diverse child by analyzing blogs located in the public domain (i.e., blogs that are searchable and accessible to the public at large). No ethics review was requested, but a research ethics board officer recommended attending to issues of copyright (See Appendix B). The blogs included in this study were identified through purposive selection, which is the deliberate selection of sources expected to provide researchers with a rich description of the topic of study (Morrow, 2005; Polkinghorne, 2005; Wertz, 2005). In the spring of 2019, the researcher used the Google search engine to locate blogs written by parents that described their experiences of affirmatively raising a gender diverse child. Specifically, 12 distinct Google searches were performed that paired the search terms “blog” and “parenting” or “raising” with the terms: “trans child”, “transgender child”, “gender non-confirming child”, “gender diverse child”, “gender expansive child”, or “gender creative child”. From the blogs identified through these searches, the various blog authors’ lists of recommended blogs were explored to discover more blogs on the same themes. This investigation revealed a total of 18 blogs authored by parents raising a gender diverse child between the ages of 3 and 21. The blogs were predominantly written by parents identifying themselves as mothers. Two blogs were written by individuals who identified

as fathers, and one was co-authored by a mother and father together. The majority of the blog authors were located in the United States, while one resided in Australia, one in Canada, and one was in an unspecified locale.

Although great variability and individuality exist within each parent-child relationship, several inclusion parameters were adopted to attempt to capture similarities across the contexts of space, time, and stages of parenting. Due to the longitudinal nature of the study, and in order to capture the unfolding of the narratives of parents over time, it was important to ensure that the blogs were written over a number of years and that the authors of the blogs provided an adequate number of distinct posts describing their experiences. In the hopes of increasing similarities of sociopolitical context, bloggers were chosen from one country. This also eased understanding and application of copyright laws. Inclusion of bloggers with elementary school aged children increased the likelihood that parents would experience similar stages of parenting and similar contexts, such as home and school. Furthermore, it has been well documented that as gender diverse children reach adolescence, their needs and experiences differ from those of younger children (Cohen-Kettenis et al., 2008; de Vries et al., 2011). Thus, in order to be eligible for the study sample, blogs were required to meet the following conditions: a) authors must reside in the same country; b) children featured in the blogs must be (or have been) elementary school aged at the time of writing; c) posts must have been written over the course of four or more years; d) blogs must include a minimum of 50 discrete posts; e) posts must be written in close temporal proximity to one another; f) the parent authoring the blog must express support for their gender diverse child; g) the blog must be in the public domain; and h) the blog must be written in English.

Of the 18 blogs identified in the initial search, four blogs met all inclusion criteria. These four blogs were located in the public domain and were written by mothers living in the United States who were affirming of their child's gender diversity. The children featured in the blogs ranged in age from 5–12 years old. At the time of data collection, the blogs had each been active for a minimum of four years, with some of them remaining active. Lastly, at the time of data collection, the number of distinct posts on each blog ranged from 52–121.

Blogs Included in the Study

The four blogs included in the study are titled as follows: a) Sarah and Ian Hoffman; b) Labels are for Jars: Words on the journey of raising a boy who eschews many social “boy” labels, and empowering him along the way; c) Gendermom: A chronicle of fun and fear, or daily life with my young trans daughter; and d) Vanessa Nichols: Writer of life. Advocate. Activist. Ally. Each of the blogs is described in more detail below, as are any demographics provided by the author of the blog, and the blog homepage URLs.

Labels are for Jars: Words on the journey of raising a boy who eschews many social “boy” labels, and empowering him along the way. This blog was written by a white queer woman and describes her experiences of raising her “gender-boundary pushing son” (“Blogging for LGBT Families”, 2008, para. 3). The author does not reveal her name or use a pseudonym. For ease of identification in the present project, she is assigned the moniker “L”. She uses the initial “Q” to identify her child. The blog was active from 2008–2015, when “S” was between the ages of five and 12. The author embeds numerous pictures of herself and her son on the blog and discloses that she lives with her wife and two children in proximity to the Boston, Massachusetts area. The Labels are for Jars blog can be accessed at: <https://labelsareforjars.wordpress.com/>

Sarah and Ian Hoffman. The Sarah and Ian Hoffman blog is primarily written by “Sarah”, who identifies as a Jewish woman. The blog is about her experiences of raising her gender non-conforming son, “Sam” (Sarah & Ian Hoffman, n.d., About Us, para. 1). The author uses pseudonyms to identify herself and her family members and does not include photos of her family on the blog. Sarah lives with her husband “Ian” and their two children in the San Francisco Bay area. She writes and speaks publicly about raising her gender diverse son. In 2010, Sarah’s husband authored a few blog posts. Due to his infrequent contributions to the blog, Ian’s posts were not included in the analysis for this study. Sarah and Ian have collaboratively written and illustrated two children’s books about a gender non-conforming (GNC) child, which have been promoted on the blog. The blog was active from 2009–2014, when their child was between seven and 12 years old. The Sarah and Ian Hoffman blog can be accessed at: <http://www.sarahandianhoffman.com/blog/>

Gendermom: A chronicle of fun and fear, or, daily life with my young trans daughter. The Gendermom blog is written by a woman in her 40s who details her experiences of raising a transgender girl. The author uses the pseudonyms “Gendermom” and “Marlo Mack” (e.g., Marlo Mack, n.d.) and does not share pictures of herself or her family on the blog. She co-parents her daughter “M.” with her ex-partner in the United States (though the particular state is not mentioned). During the course of the blog, the author developed and shared a podcast about parenting a transgender child and quit her job as a journalist to focus on podcasting. She publicizes her podcasts on her blog. The blog posts analyzed for the study were written from 2013–2019 when her child was between the ages of five and 11 years old. The Gendermom blog can be accessed at: <https://gendermom.wordpress.com/>

Vanessa Lee Nic: Writer of life. Advocate. Activist. Ally. The Vanessa Lee Nic blog is authored by a mother in her late 30s to early 40s and is about parenting her transgender son (Nichols, n.d.). Notably, Vanessa uses her real name and includes pictures of herself and her child on the blog. She resides in southwest Florida and co-parents her child with her ex-partner. The author has also created a podcast devoted to her experiences of parenting a transgender child and engages in activities related to trans advocacy. At the outset of the blog, Vanessa referred to her child using feminine pronouns, but switched to masculine pronouns over the course of the blog. To respect her child's current gender identity and for ease of identification in this study, her child will be referred to using male pronouns, with the exception of direct quotations that predate her son's transition. The blog postings included for analysis in this dissertation were written between 2014–2019, while her child was between five and 10 years old. The Vanessa Nichols blog can be accessed at: <https://vanessaleenic.com/>

The Importance of Language

Language is important as a means of self-determination and representation, and functions as an ever-evolving symbol of self. Also important to one's self-concept is having that representation of self be witnessed and mirrored back to us as confirmation that others see and honour one's true self. There may be as many identity terms as there are individuals, and it is crucial that how individuals choose to identify be respected. For the purposes of this paper, the researcher adheres to the language used by the blog authors to describe their children. Although this represents the parent's rather than the child's choice of language choice, it is evident, through reading the blogs, that the parents in this study aim to respect their child's self-identification. Unsurprisingly, the language that the blog authors use evolved over time as the child's identity and the parent's understanding of their identity evolved. In an attempt to support

each child's current identity, the most recent language used by the parent to describe their child has been used in this paper. Accordingly, two children are identified as transgender, and one as gender non-confirming (GNC) by their parents. One blog author doesn't label her child but described him in the title of her blog title "a boy who eschews many social 'boy' labels" ("About/Why blog about raising my boy", n.d.). For ease of reading, in the following manuscripts, this child will be described as gender non-conforming, or GNC, a term used to describe children whose gender expression does not align with societal expectations of their sex assigned at birth. Examples of GNC children might be girls who like play-fighting and refuse to wear dresses, often referred to as "tomboys", or boys who love sparkles, fairies, and dolls, sometimes called "pink boys". This term is analogous to the term gender expansive that has been used predominantly in this dissertation to describe children whose expression of gender differs from what is expected in a given culture (Keo-Meier & Ehrensaft, 2018). As previously mentioned, transgender is a term used to connote children whose internal, felt sense of gender is different from their sex assigned at birth (Keo-Meier & Ehrensaft, 2018), while the term gender diverse is used as an umbrella term to represent any and all gender identities or expressions that defy, question, or expand the limits of an externally imposed, binary conception of gender (Keo-Meier & Ehrensaft, 2018).

Data Analysis

Data was analyzed using a narrative-informed thematic analysis—a process of identifying, interpreting, and recording patterns within the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006), while attending to the commonplaces of narrative inquiry: temporality, sociality, and spatiality (Clandinin & Rosiek, 2007). An inductive approach, narrative analysis generates themes and patterns that are closely linked to the data itself, rather than being informed by theoretical

frameworks or pre-existing researcher assumptions. The thematic analysis was conducted in accordance with Braun and Clarke's (2006, 2012) six-phase recursive process: (a) familiarization with the data, (b) generating initial codes, (c) searching for themes, (d) reviewing themes, (e) defining and naming themes, and (f) producing a report.

Familiarization with the Data

The first phase of thematic analysis, familiarization with the data, requires an immersive experience through reading and re-reading of the texts. For the current project, this phase started with downloading the demarcated blog posts into the qualitative software program NVIVO. Next, the primary researcher read each of the blogs from beginning to end to become more intimately acquainted with the data. Notes of initial impressions were generated as memory aids and triggers for future phases of coding and analysis, as suggested by Braun and Clarke (2012).

Generating Initial Codes

All posts for each of the four blogs were thoroughly re-read and significant portions of each blog post were identified by a label or code. Coding provides researchers with a means of identifying and naming small components of the raw data that may be relevant to the research questions (Braun & Clarke, 2012). All relevant data were arranged into these meaningful categorizations or codes (Tuckett, 2005). For example, two codes used in the present study were: "public support of child", and "worry about judgement from others".

Searching for Themes

During the third phase of analysis, codes were organized into the broader level of themes. A theme "captures something important about the data in relation to the research question, and represents some level of patterned response or meaning within the data set" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 82). Codes that represent areas of similarity were combined to form over-arching

themes, or sorted into themes of various levels (e.g., themes, sub-themes) as suggested by Braun and Clarke (2012). Additionally, relationships between codes, themes, and sub-themes began to materialize in this phase. Codes were loosely organized according to the three-dimensional narrative inquiry space framework of temporality, sociality, and spatiality, as proposed by Clandinin and Connolly (2000). The iterative process of generating themes and sub-themes continued until all coded raw data had been organized and collated into relevant themes. For example, the aforementioned codes “public support of child”, and “worry about judgement from others” overlapped, and at times, both codes were applied to the same text. Therefore, the two codes were combined into the overarching theme: “revealing support of child’s gender diversity to others”.

Reviewing Themes

Phase four of this analytic process involved a revisiting and re-examination of the themes generated in the previous step to ensure that the themes were relevant and cohesive in relation to the raw and coded data. Further, each of the blogs was read through a final time to establish that the themes meaningfully represented the entirety of the data set, as recommended by Braun and Clarke (2006). If the themes were not coherent or if they were irrelevant, they were adjusted, discarded, or new themes were created to ensure more accurate representation.

Defining and Naming Themes

During the penultimate phase of analysis, these themes were further refined and defined. For each theme, the core issue was described in relation to the research questions and checked against the data categorized under that theme. Quotations that were particularly illustrative of the core issue of the theme were highlighted. Efforts were made to name the themes in ways that maintained the integrity of the original text (Braun & Clarke, 2012). Although the initial name of

the theme “revealing support of child’s gender diversity to others” was descriptive of the theme, it veered away from the raw data and the words of the bloggers. Going back into the data generated the more refined and fitting theme name “parents’ coming out”, based on the following blog quote: “I realize that it really is a coming out process each time. And that one really does have to come out over and over and over. And it’s never just simple. Or easy” (“Coming Out Again and Again and Again”, 2010, January 29, para. 6).

Producing a Report

The final phase of thematic analysis concerns presenting a consistent and meaningful story about the data (Braun & Clarke, 2012). This step involved making decisions about how best to present the themes in a way that coherently relates all the themes together, and also connects back to the research questions. Additionally, in this phase, quotations were considered for inclusion in the report that best highlight the report’s themes. Two manuscripts were produced from the results of the narrative-informed thematic analysis corresponding to the two research questions set forth at the beginning of this research project. The first manuscript describes the experiences of parents affirmatively raising a gender diverse child and highlights the temporal and social aspects of narrative inquiry. The focus of the second manuscript attends more closely to the commonplace of space within the tradition of narrative inquiry, in an attempt to better understand the function of online blogging for parents supportively raising their gender diverse child.

Further Analysis

Two further analyses were conducted following the narrative-informed thematic analysis. First, upon examining the results of the thematic analysis related to the first research question, broader discourses were identified that are implicated in the construction of the positionality and

experiences of parents affirmatively raising gender diverse children. The aims of a Foucauldian discourse analysis are to illuminate existing societal power relations, and to interrogate assumed truths and problematize 'normative' individual and institutional practices (Johnson & MacLean, 2020). Thus, in the first manuscript, the dominant discourses and associated tensions that run through the data were examined and discussed in light of possible implications for personal and social change.

The second manuscript, which addresses the second research question pertaining to the function of blogging for parents who affirm their gender diverse children, is predominantly concerned with online spaces and practices. Many of the themes generated by the narrative-informed thematic analysis were relational in nature. Specifically, bloggers were writing in relation to their audience, many of whom would leave comments below the blog posts. The researcher noted the emergence of themes that appeared to be directed towards readers or in response to reader comments, and these comments were systematically examined as a way of better understanding the relational nature of the online space.

Trustworthiness and Credibility

A central characteristic of qualitative research is its commitment to credibility and trustworthiness. Trustworthiness reflects the reliability and validity of the data (Janesick, 1994; Lincoln & Guba, 1985), while credibility signifies the ability of the research to accurately capture the experiences and views of the participants. The present study employed techniques such as reflexivity, sensitivity to context, verification, dependability, and catalytic validity to ensure the credibility and trustworthiness of the data.

Reflexivity

In the context of qualitative inquiry, reflexivity refers to an ongoing practice of critical self-analysis of the researcher's assumptions and biases throughout the entire course of the research project (Schwandt, 2007). Reflexivity encourages the researcher to reflect on how their own values, life experience, theoretical leanings and construction of reality may affect the research process (Morrow, 2005). In accordance with Tobin & Begley (2004), the researcher maintained a self-reflexive record of her internal and external experiences throughout the project. This included keeping accounts of the researcher's personal thoughts and reactions that arose during the research process. The researcher particularly attended to the surfacing of biases and assumptions, discussing any recurring themes with a fellow doctoral candidate who had experience working with LGBTQ+ populations clinically and in research settings. For instance, one theme that emerged and was addressed concerned the impact of the researchers' outsider status with regards to the salient identities of the blog authors. Another theme that was discussed at length involved the ethics of using online blogs as a data source.

Verification

Trustworthiness may also be enhanced through the use of verification. The process of data analysis verification via judges or auditors helps to ensure that the conclusions derived from the data by the researcher are inclusive, accurate, reliable, and sound (Creswell, 2007; Given, 2008). The researcher's supervisor served as an external auditor to assess the analytic process as well as the accuracy of the results in each phase. The researcher and her supervisor held regular consensus meetings to inspect the ongoing analytic process and ensure that all raw data were appropriately categorized into recognizable and verifiable codes and then combined into meaningful themes. Moreover, employing an auditor served to safeguard against the possibility that the researcher had overlooked other possible meanings in the data, and to ensure that the

interpretations drawn from the data were reliable. At times, divergent themes arose during the consensus meetings. When this occurred, the researcher and her supervisor returned to the data and, as suggested by Creswell (2007), discussed the issue until consensus was reached.

Sensitivity to Context

Sensitivity to context refers to exploring the socio-cultural aspects of participants' experience, and this was central to the current project. Attending to contextual factors provides a more nuanced and complex understanding of the meaning that a participant ascribes to their life stories (Smith et al., 2009). Remaining sensitive to context is consistent with the FSC epistemological position as well as both narrative inquiry and thematic analysis. Moreover, sensitivity to context was especially highlighted by employing a Foucauldian discourse analysis wherein power relations were examined in relation to normative narratives about parenting and gender.

Dependability

Dependability refers to the process of ensuring that the methods and techniques used to analyze and interpret the research data are transparent and understandable (Tobin & Begley, 2004). Dependability requires the use of a detailed audit trail of the research process, including documentation of the order in which the research activities were performed, the analytic process through which interpretations were made, and internal and external influences on the collection and analysis of the data (Morrow, 2005; Shenton, 2004). In the context of the current study, an audit trail was closely documented and chronological records of all data analysis processes were kept by the researcher, providing transparency and insight into the analytic process. This audit tool was particularly useful during consensus meetings to be able to explain the iterative process of data analysis.

Catalytic Validity

Catalytic validity represents the degree to which the research process is meaningful to the research participants (Lather, 1986). This concept highlights the idea that involvement in the research process will change both the researcher and participant, and has the potential to increasing self-understanding and self-determination (Lather, 1991). The current project does not have research participants, but rather analyzed the online blogs of parents. Within their writing, there is evidence that the process of creating and maintaining the blogs is significant to the authors and elicited transformational self-reflection. Although it was not possible to verify catalytic validity in the traditional sense through an interview question, even a cursory reading of the blogs revealed that the process of recording their experiences in this format was a meaningful practice to the authors. One blog author wrote: "I blog, honestly, as an exercise in expanding my own compassion, open-mindedness, and understanding" ("Blogging for LGBT Families", 2008, para. 6).

Chapter 4: Manuscript 1

A Thematic Analysis of the Experiences of Parents Raising a Gender Diverse Child

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Abstract

Understandings of gender identity development have predominantly relied upon on the conceptualization of gender as dichotomous. However, the gender identities and expressions of gender diverse children—those children who defy and broaden the confines of an externally imposed binary system of gender—illustrate the limitations of gender as a binary system by refusing to fit neatly into opposing categories of female or male, feminine/masculine and/or girl or boy. Raising a gender diverse child in a world that promotes and sanctions binary conceptions of gender is often an unexpected and challenging experience for parents. This qualitative longitudinal research study aimed to better understand the experiences of parents who are supportively raising a gender expansive or transgender child. A narrative-informed thematic analysis was applied to four blogs located in the public domain and written by mothers who were parenting a pre-teen gender diverse child. Results indicated that parents engaged in ongoing interpersonal and intrapersonal processes to understand how to best raise their child. Additionally, discourses emerged from the texts indicating that in order to supportively raise a gender expansive or transgender child, parents must be willing to shift between the roles of leading and following, while continually engaging in an iterative process of meaning-making with their child in the arena of gender. Implications for counselling and psychotherapy are discussed.

Keywords: parenting, child, gender, gender diverse, transgender, gender expansive, blogs

Although the literature about gender identity development has been built on the conceptualization of gender as dichotomous, research shows that for many children, gender identity development does not always follow a binary path. That is, for many children, the sex they are assigned at birth does not correspond to their gender expression and/or gender identities (Sandberg et al., 1993). Discussing gender identity in children, Möller et al. (2009) estimated that between 2.6–6% of boys and 5–12% of girls will identify, behave, or express their gender differently than what is typically expected for their assigned sex. These estimates indicate that during childhood, some children tend to ‘try on’ a variety of gendered behaviours. While such experimentation appears to be part of the normative pattern of gender development, it is not accounted for in many traditional theories of gender identity development. Furthermore, many gender diverse children, who resist and extend the limits of a binary gender system, will come to perform gender in more hegemonic ways—that is, in ways that ‘match’ their assigned sex—as adults (Zucker & Bradley, 1995; Wallien & Cohen-Kettenis, 2008). It is presently unknown whether the motivation underlying this shift is a process innate to the child or if it originates from external pressures to conform (Menvielle et al., 2005). The system of culturally informed beliefs reinforcing the idea that gender is binary (boy/girl, man/woman) and determined by binary biological sex characteristics (male/female) is known as genderism (Hill & Willoughby, 2005). The ideology of genderism undergirds the notion that gender non-conformity is adverse and pathological. In modern Western societies, it has traditionally been expected that gender will align with assigned sex and regulate gender expression and presentation—the performance of which includes sexual orientation, dress, mannerisms, interests, and other behaviours (Hill & Willoughby, 2005). Given the significant number of children whose gender identities or

expressions do not conform to societal expectations based on their sex assigned at birth, there is a clear need to expand our understanding of gender.

As the evolution of language is shaped by current systems of power, including geopolitical and generational influences (Davis, 2009), it is acknowledged that the language chosen to describe people's identities in this article is imperfect and influenced by current trends. It is reflective of a certain time and place in history and cannot do justice to the complexities of evolving gender identities. The terminology used in this manuscript is guided by the conceptualization and work of gender affirmative scholars Keo-Meier and Ehrensaft (2018). They describe someone whose internal felt-sense of gender differs from their assigned sex as *transgender*. For example, a child assigned female at birth whose internal sense of gender or gender identity is non-binary will be described as transgender in this article. *Gender expansive* is the term used to describe a child whose expressions and presentations of gender, in whole or in part, differ from what is typically expected from a child of a certain gender identity, in a given culture (Keo-Meier & Ehrensaft, 2018). These children are often called "pink boys" or "tomboys" (Keo-Meier & Ehrensaft, 2018, p. 8). Children can embrace both transgender and gender expansive identities and expressions (Keo-Meier & Ehrensaft, 2018; Temple Newhook et al., 2018). The umbrella term *gender diverse* is considered by Keo-Meier and Ehrensaft (2018) to describe all children who defy and broaden the confines of an externally imposed binary system of gender, including children described as transgender or gender expansive. At times, however, when describing the data, the term gender non-conforming (GNC) has been used to accurately reflect the term used by some parents when describing their children in their blog.

For much of Western history, the field of psychology has pathologized childhood non-conformation to binary gender norms and promoted the notion that parents were to blame for

gender variance in their children (Ehrensaft, 2007, 2011). It follows, then, that mental health professionals advocated a reparative approach for gender-expansive children, with the treatment goal of helping children accept their assigned sex and adopt the expected, normative gendered behaviours (e.g., Zucker, 2008). More recently, the preponderance of psychological research about gender diverse children has focused on the promotion of their health and wellbeing. It is now generally accepted in scientific circles that all gender identities and expressions are healthy and within the bounds of what is considered normal human variation, and furthermore, that attempting to change or otherwise manipulate any individual's gender is harmful (Travers et al., 2012; Veltman & Chaimowitz, 2014; Wallace & Russell, 2013). In fact, research has shown that parents who provide a supportive environment and affirm their child's gender identity and gender expressions increase the child's resiliency and opportunity to thrive (Grossman et al., 2011; Hill & Menvielle, 2009; Olson et al., 2016; Travers et al., 2012) whereas when children's core identities, such as gender, are regarded negatively, this is likely to lead to a lasting sense of shame (Ehrensaft et al., 2018). Furthermore, the experience of minority stress (e.g., exclusion, discrimination) that some gender diverse children face can lead to increased negative mental health outcomes, including post-traumatic stress disorder, depression, anxiety, and suicidality (Bockting et al., 2013; Pflum et al., 2015; Testa et al., 2015). Conversely, Olson et al. (2016) found that when transgender children were supported in their chosen gender identity, they showed similar rates of depression to cisgender (non-transgender) children and only slightly higher rates of anxiety. Parents are thus uniquely positioned to play a crucial role in the healthy development of a gender-expansive child.

In addition to research on gender development in children, there is a growing body of literature devoted to the experiences of parents or guardians of gender diverse children. In her

research on parents raising “girlyboys”¹¹, Ehrensaft (2007) has identified two parenting styles: *facilitative* and *obstructive*. She described the obstructive parent as one who denounces and attempts to ‘fix’ their child’s gender diversity, in contrast with the facilitative parent, who supports their child’s diverse expression of gender and assists their navigation of rigid binary gender expectations. She also suggests that parents may alternate between facilitative and obstructive behaviours as they attempt to both support their gender-expansive child and protect them from an unaccepting society. Ehrensaft (2007) counsels that to become a facilitative parent requires engagement in a process of uncovering and examining one’s conscious and unconscious beliefs about gender before these biases infringe on the child’s gender development.

Raising a gender diverse child is often an unexpected experience for parents, and the literature reveals that many parents struggle to come to terms with their child’s gender expansiveness. Parents may initially experience feelings of confusion, and disbelief, or assume that their child is merely going through a phase that would end, given time (Gray et al., 2016; Gregor et al., 2015; Johnson & Benson, 2014; Kuvalanka et al., 2014; Malpas, 2011; Möller et al., 2009). Moreover, parents may experience a period of time wherein they suspect, or know in part, that their child’s gender is diverse, but neglect to acknowledge it (Zamboni, 2006). As parents come to terms with their child’s gender diversity, they may experience a sense of mourning or grief for the child they expected to raise (Kuvalanka et al. 2018; Norwood, 2013). Norwood (2013) suggests that the sense of loss arises not only from the change in the child and the heteronormative, gendered expectations the parents held of that identity (e.g., My daughter will get married in a white wedding gown), but a sense of loss for what such a change signifies for their own identity and parenting role (e.g., I’ll never get to be the mother of the bride). Some

¹¹ “Girlyboy” is a term used by parent participants to describe their gender-diverse children who were assigned male at birth (Ehrensaft, 2007, p. 269)

parents blamed themselves for their child's gender diversity, believing that they made errors in parenting or that they had not properly modeled gender roles and behaviours (Johnson & Benson, 2014; Kuvalanka, et al., 2014; Kuvalanka, et al., 2018; Pyne 2016)

A common theme in the literature regarding the experiences of parents raising gender pertains to worrying about their child's future. Specifically, parents worried about their child having to contend with bullying and discrimination (Katz-Wise et al., 2017; Pyne, 2016; Rahilly, 2015; Pullen Sansfaçon et al., 2015). Additionally, parents were concerned about the risks of future potential medical interventions and worried that their child may regret more permanent interventions such as surgeries (Gray et al., 2017; Katz-Wise et al., 2017; Schimmel-Bristow et al., 2018). As parents moved in the direction of affirming their child's gender diversity, they simultaneously experienced moments of confusion and doubt, and at times, were unsure if taking an affirmative stance was correct (Hill & Menvielle, 2009; Kuvalanka et al., 2014; Pyne, 2016; Pullen Sansfaçon et al., 2015).

In one of the few studies of facilitative parenting, Pullen Sansfaçon et al. (2015) conducted a qualitative participatory action research project that explored the experiences of parents who support their child's gender diversity. They found that the parents in the study faced unique challenges, such as defining and understanding gender diversity in their child, supporting gender exploration, embracing their child's identity, protecting their child, and seeking appropriate and affirmative health and social services. Additionally, parents in this study experienced emotional challenges in supporting their child, including stress related to worrying about their child, struggles with feelings of helplessness and loneliness, and feeling uncertain of whether they were acting in their child's best interest. Undergirding all of these parental experiences was the concept of "invisibility and non-recognition" (Pullen Sansfaçon et al., 2015,

p. 55). That is, parents reported that the lack of understanding and acknowledgement of gender diversity in society presented relational and structural barriers to affirmatively raising their child. Due to a lack of governmental acknowledgement of and support for gender diverse children, which contributed to parents' feelings of invisibility, they felt a responsibility to become agents of change in their communities. For example, parents organized a support group, which over time developed into a non-profit organization. This group's actions included maintaining a Facebook page for parents of gender diverse children and petitioning the Canadian government for better protection infrastructure for gender diverse children (Pullen Sansfaçon et al., 2015).

More recent psychological research has provided a broad understanding of gender diverse children and their families. The predominant focus of this research has been the treatment and mental health needs of gender-expansive children, while less attention has been given to the experiences of parents caring for and raising gender diverse children. Moreover, there is little research about parents who support or facilitate their child's diverse gender development. Thus, the aim of this research project was to better understand, through systematic analysis of four parents' stories, the experiences of parents who support their child's gender expansiveness. Specifically, this study explored the blogs of four parents of gender non-conforming and transgender children in order to identify and understand the intrapersonal and contextual processes to which these parents attend.

Method

Epistemology

The present study employed a feminist social constructivist (FSC) epistemology and narrative inquiry methodology to examine the experiences of parents who are affirmatively raising their gender diverse child, by analyzing four parenting blogs. FSC is an anti-oppressive

epistemological framework whose tenets include the existence of multiple realities (Creswell, 2007; Haverkamp & Young, 2007), the co-construction of knowledge (Haverkamp & Young, 2007; Sprague, 2005) and the performativity of gender (Bohan, 1993; Sinacore & Enns, 2005). The assumptions forming the basis of FSC epistemology are particularly appropriate to the present study's focus on experiences of parenting across time and space. FSC positions participants as experts on their own identities and experiences and allows for a multiplicity of experiences to simultaneously coexist (Creswell, 2007; Haverkamp & Young, 2007; Ponterotto, 2005; Raskin, 2002). This emphasis on multiple realities supports how participants described their evolving understanding of gender and their relationship to parenting their child, whose performance of gender also changed over time. Furthermore, the underlying assumption of FSC epistemology that gender is performative (Bohan, 1993; Sinacore & Enns, 2005) is exceedingly pertinent to this study. This epistemological stance problematizes the notion that gender is linked to anatomy, and hence, inherent in the body. Additionally, FSC researchers disagree with the idea that masculinity and femininity are polarized and cannot be simultaneously enacted, which is congruent with an understanding of gender as abundant, complex, evolving, and diverse. Thus, understanding gender, from an FSC standpoint, as a set of actions that can be performed in innumerable, unique, and creative ways is essential to the aims of the present study.

Methodology

Individuals shape their understandings of themselves, their relationships, and their experiences through their stories, which allow them to interpret and make meaning out of their past, present, and future worlds. Narrative inquiry, then, is a way of thinking about experience (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000), and narrative methodology is the “study of experience as it is lived” (Clandinin & Rosiek, 2007, p. 69). Through narrative, individuals endeavor to give order

to, make sense of, describe, and resolve the circumstances and events in their lives. As such, the stories that people tell are expressions of who they are in the world (Bamberg, 2012). Identities are composed and created through lived experiences and the meanings drawn from them (Clandinin, 2006; Dewey, 1938/1997). Time, context, and place, the three main dimensions of narrative inquiry (Clandinin & Rosiek, 2007), are represented through the parents' blogs across multiple years, highlighting different contexts and locations from which parents describe their experiences of raising a gender diverse child. As FSC and narrative inquiry are considered to complement each other, these methods are appropriate for an exploration of parenting related to a child's gender identity. That is, parenting a gender diverse child is not a static, immutable action or identity, but rather involves identities and relationships that are fluid and evolve over time, context, and space. Employing an FSC epistemology with a narrative methodology allows an unfolding of identities over time to occur through a person telling their story, such as through the creation and maintenance of a blog.

Procedure

This study employed purposive selection, which allowed the researcher to select blogs wherein parents wrote about experiences related to the topic of study—in this case, about affirmatively raising a GNC or transgender child (Polkinghorne, 2005; Wertz, 2005). In the spring of 2019, blogs were identified by performing a Google search that paired the terms “blog” and “parenting” or “raising”, with the terms: “trans child”, “transgender child”, “gender non-confirming child”, “gender diverse child”, “gender expansive child”, and “gender creative child”. Additional blogs were found by viewing the blog rolls of blogs identified in the initial search. Blog rolls are a list of links to other blogs about similar topics. This investigation revealed a total

of 18 blogs authored by parents who were raising a gender diverse child between the ages of 3 and 21.

Blogs included in the study were required to meet specific criteria in order to capture similarities across the contexts of space, time, and stages of parenting. For instance, to capture the unfolding of experience over time, it was important that blogs be maintained over a number of years, and include a minimum number of posts during the time period studied. The age of the child during the course of the blog was another defining factor, as the needs and experiences of gender diverse individuals shift when they reach different developmental milestones such as puberty (Cohen-Kettenis et al., 2008; de Vries et al., 2011). Ensuring that the children were in a similar age range increased the likelihood that the parent bloggers would experience similar stages of parenting and encounter similar contexts, such as home and school. Thus, in order to be included in the study, blogs were required to meet the following conditions: (a) parents writing the selected blogs all reside in the same country; (b) children featured in the blogs were elementary school aged at the time of writing; (c) posts were written over the course of four or more years; (d) blog comprised of a minimum of 50 discrete posts; (e) selected blogs were written in close temporal proximity to one another; (f) parent writing the blog expressed support for their gender diverse child in the blog content; (g) in the public domain; and (h) written in English. Of the 18 blogs identified in the initial search, four met all inclusion requirements. They are described below.

Labels are for Jars: Words on the journey of raising a boy who eschews many social 'boy' labels, and empowering him along the way (<http://labelsareforjars.wordpress.com>).

This blog was written by a queer white woman who lives with her wife and two children in or near Boston, Massachusetts. She is the mother of a “gender-boundary-pushing son”

(“Blogging for LGBT Families”, 2008, para. 3). Her blog posts were written from 2008–2015, while her child was between the ages of five and 12 years old. Although she doesn’t offer her name and uses the initial “Q” to identify her son, the blog contains many pictures of them both. For ease of reading, the author of the blog is identified as L. in this manuscript.

Sarah and Ian Hoffman (<http://www.sarahandianhoffman.com/blog/>).

This blog was predominantly authored by “Sarah Hoffman” (Sarah uses pseudonyms for herself and her family), a Jewish woman living and raising her children in the San Francisco Bay area. The blog is about her experiences of raising her gender non-conforming (GNC) son “Sam”, who she describes as a “pink boy” (Sarah Hoffman, n.d., Home) floating “somewhere in the middle of the gender spectrum” (Sarah Hoffman, 2009, September 2, para. 17) . Sarah writes and speaks publicly about raising her GNC son, and has co-authored two children’s books about a GNC child with her husband. The blog posts were written between 2009–2014, while Sam was seven to 12 years old. Sarah and her family are not identified in any pictures on the blog.

Gendermom: A chronicle of fun and fear, or, daily life with my young trans daughter (<http://gendermom.wordpress.com>).

“Marlo Mack” (a pseudonym) is the author of this blog where she records her experiences of parenting her transgender daughter, referred to in the blog as “M.”, with her ex-partner. She lives in the United States, but the state isn’t mentioned. The blog posts included in analysis were written between 2013–2019, while M. was between five and 11 years old. Marlo is also the creator of a podcast about raising her transgender child, which she publicizes on the blog. She does not share pictures of herself or her child on the blog.

Vanessa Lee Nic: Writer of life. Advocate. Activist. Ally. (<http://vanessaleenic.com>).

This blog was written by Vanessa Nichols, who co-parents her trans son with her ex-partner, in southwest Florida. The blog posts included for analysis were written between 2014–2019, while her child was between five and ten years old. Her child transitioned during the course of the blog, so earlier posts used the pronouns she/her, and later posts used the pronouns he/him. Vanessa also created a podcast devoted to parenting her transgender child. She does not use a pseudonym and the blog includes many pictures of herself and her son.

Blogs as a Data Source: Ethical Considerations

Using blogs as a source of data, as with any approach, has both benefits and challenges. In particular, working with blogs as data raises issues of characterization of online data and privacy issues. Ongoing debate exists as to whether the use of online content as research data should be considered human subject research or if online content is a form of cultural artefact, akin to a book or article. At the heart of this question is the issue of whether the creators of online content should be protected as human subjects, or whether they are aware and informed producers of content, acting with agency, and who should be credited for their work (von Benzon, 2018). Considering the authors of online content as human subjects in research may help to protect their work from being used outside of the way that it was intended, and thus mitigate any unintended or increased attention to the works or the author that may result in harm. On the other hand, considering the authors as human subjects may detract from the value of the cultural production. Additionally, online publishing affords content creators the visibility and self-determination that may not be available in offline settings (Bassett & O’Riordan, 2002). This may be especially pertinent for members of certain populations (e.g., LGBTQ+ communities) where dominant societal narratives diminish and belittle lived experiences and lived identities. For this project, the authors of the blogs are considered to be knowledgeable and

capable authors, and as such, their words have been credited, as any work should be, under copyright law.

Although the blogs are considered to be cultural artefacts, this does not attend to the intention of the author for the public or private nature of their work. Eastham (2011) suggests that researchers can examine six attributes of a blog to determine the private or public nature of the blog, as intended by the author. Thus, each blog was examined to understand the authors choices regarding: (a) indexing for search, (b) limiting to cache, (c) password requirements, (d) allowing comments, (e) providing an RSS feed, and (f) reasons for blogging. This investigation revealed that all of the blogs included in this study have been indexed for search, are not limited to cache, are not password protected, allow readers to comment, and provide an RSS feed or other ways to easily follow the blog. Further, the central motivations for all bloggers included the creation of online community, and education, both of which require a public audience. Thus, the blogs included in the study, according to Eastham's (2011) framework, have been considered to be public in nature.

Data Analysis

Data was analyzed using a narrative-informed thematic approach. This analysis included a process of identifying, interpreting, and recording patterns within data (Braun & Clarke, 2006), while simultaneously attending to temporality, sociality, and place, the commonplaces of narrative inquiry (Clandinin & Rosiek, 2007). Using NVIVO software, the thematic analysis was conducted in accordance with Braun and Clarke's (2006, 2012) six phase, recursive process: (a) familiarization with the data, (b) generating initial codes, (c) searching for themes, (d) reviewing themes, (e) defining and naming themes, and (f) producing a report.

To begin, the blog posts that were to be analyzed were downloaded into NVIVO, and read and re-read to increase familiarity with the data, and initial impressions were noted as suggested by Braun and Clarke (2012). Initial codes were generated by arranging the raw data into meaningful categories or codes (Tuckett, 2005). Next, codes that depicted areas of similarity were combined to find over-arching themes and subthemes (Braun & Clarke, 2012). Themes were reviewed to ensure that they meaningfully represented what was expressed in the blogs. Finally, themes were further refined and defined, and quotations that best represented themes were chosen to be included in the results section of this manuscript. Additionally, a Foucauldian discourse analysis (FDA) was used to identify and understand the broader discourses that are implicated in the construction of the positionality and experiences of parents who are affirmatively raising gender diverse children. The goal of FDA is to highlight the existing societal power relations, question assumed truths, and query notions of “normative” practices (Johnson & McLean, 2020). The application of FDA to the dominant discourses revealed in the themes were considered in light of possible implications for personal and social change.

Credibility and Trustworthiness

The present study employed a number of established techniques to ensure the credibility and trustworthiness of the data, including reflexivity, verification, sensitivity to context, dependability, and catalytic validity.

Reflexivity

The personal and social conditions of researchers colour the lens through which experiences under study are queried and understood. Reflectivity encourages the researcher to reflect on how their own values, life experience, theoretical leanings and construction of reality may affect the research process (Morrow, 2005). The primary researcher engaged in a process of

reflexivity by recording internal and external experiences that emerged throughout the project, and discussed recurring biases and assumptions with a fellow doctoral candidate. Moreover, both researchers together engaged in an ongoing reflective process of trying to understand how their subjective stances and social locations influenced each step of the project. For instance, the primary researcher, who has not had the experience of parenting a child, engaged in a continual reflective process of trying to understand how this position may have influenced her understanding of the parent narratives in the study.

Verification

Trustworthiness may be enhanced through verifying the data analysis process via the use of judges and auditors with the goal of ensuring that the conclusions drawn from the research are sound and accurately represent the data (Creswell, 2007; Given, 2008). In the present study, the process of verification entailed regular consensus meetings between the two authors to ensure that all raw data were appropriately categorized into recognizable and verifiable codes and then combined into meaningful themes.

Sensitivity to Context

Consideration of contextual factors, such as socio-cultural aspects of experience, supports a deeper and more nuanced understanding of the meaning that participants attribute to their life stories (Smith et al., 2009). Employing FDA in this study illuminated existing socio-cultural power relations that greatly influenced participant narratives.

Dependability

Dependability refers to the process of ensuring that the methods and techniques used to analyze and interpret the research data are transparent and clearly explained. As recommended

by Morrow (2005) and Shenton (2004), the primary author closely documented the chronological process of data analysis to increase transparency and insight into the analytic process.

Catalytic Validity

Catalytic validity describes the degree to which the research process is meaningful to the research participants, and represents the notion that through engaging in the research process, participants will increase their self-understanding and self-determination (Lather, 1991). While it was not possible to verify catalytic validity for the present study as the data was collected from unsolicited published texts, the writers indicated within these texts that creating and maintaining a blog about raising their GNC or transgender child was a meaningful process. For instance, the author of one of the blogs included in the study wrote: "Writing is my therapy. It's my outlet. It's my truth" (Nichols, n.d., para. 4).

Results

Analysis of the blogs revealed intrapersonal and interpersonal processes that parents experienced as they raised and came to understand their child. These processes tended to overlap and were similar for parents of transgender and gender diverse youth; however, there was variation in the evolution of these processes. Nonetheless, central to these processes was the act of repeatedly embracing their child's gender expansiveness. Parents described processes of moving through experiences of confusion, doubt, and insecurity as iterative in nature, meaning that they worked through these processes repeatedly as new information, contexts, and challenges emerged. These iterative processes occurred within the larger context of unwavering support and love for their child and are represented in the themes and subthemes generated from the data (see Table 1). Themes to be discussed include: genderism, letting go, coming out, seeking knowledge, creating community, and managing unanticipated demands.

Table 1

Summary of Themes and Sub-themes of Experiences of Parents who are Raising a Gender Diverse Child

Themes	Subthemes
1. Genderism	(a) Working through my own genderism (b) Witnessing impacts of genderism
2. Letting go	
3. Coming out	
4. Seeking knowledge, creating community	
5. Managing unanticipated demands	(a) Emotional demands (i) Fretting and Protecting (ii) Feeling helpless (iii) Grieving (b) External Demands (i) Devoting time and energy (ii) Being blamed and bullied (iii) Creating a sense of safety

Genderism

Genderism, the system of culturally informed beliefs that endorses the understanding of gender as a binary construct (Hill & Willoughby, 2005), was a theme throughout all of the blogs. Specifically, parents talked about working through their own internalized genderism and bearing witness to the impacts of genderism.

Working Through Genderism

Through the act of supportively parenting their gender diverse child, parents developed an evolving and increasing awareness and understanding of the genderism that permeates social norms and cultural expectations of how women and men are expected to identify and express their gender (e.g., through their preferences, sexuality, mannerisms, dress, and other behaviours). As L. aptly put it: “One of the amazing bonuses to being Q’s mom is how he has helped me to see even more of the engrained, gendered roles out there in the world ... [it] has shone a light on all of those things” (“Seeing the Differences”, 2008, para. 1).

All four parents wrote about how social reactions to their children’s clothing choices illustrate the limitations of a binary model of gender, as well as the almost invisible ways that gender is enforced, and the resultant implications. For example, L. described interactions in which other adults criticized her gender non-conforming son’s fashion choices, couching such commentary in ‘helpful’ advice such as, “Skirts aren’t good for running around and sliding” (“Insinuations”, 2008, para. 2). L. noted that such comments are rarely directed towards girls who are engaged in similar activities, concluding: “The ultimate shame, though, is that these insinuations are insidious. Insinuations about skirts being wrong for boys plants seeds among boys who wear them and boys who don’t about what the ‘right’ thing is for them to wear” (“Insinuations”, 2008, para. 4). From clothing choices to future sexuality, stereotypes informed

by societal gender norms abounded. Sarah described fielding questions about whether her young GNC son would be gay when he was older. She explained: "I hear this question all the time, from family, friends, and strangers who learn about Sam's proclivity for pink. It's a question that reflects the asker's assumption that boys who like pink must be gay" (Sarah Hoffman, 2009, September 24, para. 2).

In a similar vein, Marlo described fielding questions and concerns from others following her daughter's transition: "If my five-year-old child had a vagina, would anyone be giving me shit for letting her wear dresses and call herself a girl?", she wondered, "Would anyone be telling me that 'five years old is *awfully* young to be assigning labels'?" (Marlo Mack, 2013, July 10, para. 8). Marlo pointed to the absurdity of asking the mother of a young cisgender (non-transgender) child "'So are you *sure* she's a girl? I mean, can you really know that already?' ... But this is exactly the question people ask *me* on a regular basis" (Marlo Mack, 2013, July 10, paras. 9-10). Marlo's blog describes the kind of social scrutiny and judgement based on genderism and gender stereotypes to which all parents in the study appeared to be routinely subjected. At the same time, she commented on the fact that when her trans daughter's behaviour was not explicitly in line with feminine hegemonic norms, at times she caught herself struggling to understand her child's preferences: "I have to admit to some moments of doubt lately ('Is she *really* transgender? Could it all have been a phase?')....She has never said she isn't a girl anymore. *For cryin' out loud, Mom, she's just wearing pants!*" (Marlo Mack, 2014, May 23, paras. 14-15). Grappling with her doubts, Marlo reflected on what she was doing when she was M.'s age: "My sister and I were building forts, sword-fighting with sticks, and playing games that involved pretending to be spies and fighting monsters.... M.'s new interests don't mean she's a boy; they mean she's just like her mom" (Marlo Mack, 2014, May 23, paras. 15-16).

Thus, it appears that even when parents thought they had worked through their personal biases, their own internalized genderism unexpectedly re-emerged and needed to be worked through again.

Through analysis of the blogs, it became evident that the authors each went through a process of identifying societal genderism and confronting their own beliefs about gender—specifically, how the notion of binary gender is socially constructed and culturally informed. However, these struggles presented differently in the parents of GNC children versus the parents of transgender children. The parents of GNC children expressed struggling with two seemingly conflicting needs: to support their child, and to process their own beliefs about gender. For example, L. described an occasion where her GNC son wore a dress in public:

At that moment, I had to do two things. 1. Get behind his choice [to wear a dress] 100%.
2. Deal with my own shame, embarrassment, fear ... or a whole other host of undesirable emotions around Q's desire to do things his own way/dress like a girl/whatever I guess it's normal, because the strength of the collective societal tide as it relates to gender roles is SO VERY STRONG. Yet I'm ashamed that I have to struggle. ("OK, OK, OK", 2008, paras. 3-6)

However, when the parents of transgender children initially learned that their child's internal felt-sense of gender was different than the one that matched their assigned sex, they responded by trying to convince their child that they could transgress gender expectations, but that they could not be a different gender. For instance, Marlo remembered: "For the first year, I hesitated, letting my child grow her hair long and wear dresses every day, but pushing back when she wanted to switch pronouns and change her name" (Marlo Mack, 2013, June 27, para. 10). At the same time, Marlo tried to support her child as best as she could by presenting alternatives: "I

bought her a cool T-shirt that said 'Boys Can Wear Pink'....I bought her the cool new children's book, *My Princess Boy*, about a little boy who loves 'girl stuff' and his parents love him anyway" (Marlo Mack, 2013, June 27, para. 10).

In the same vein, Vanessa described avoiding her child's questions about becoming a "real boy", telling him that they would talk about it when he was older, all the while trying to support her child as best she could (Nichols, 2018, May 9, para. 14). In Vanessa's words: "I thought I was being so very supportive since I was allowing him to dress how he wanted, choose his own toys, cut his hair off. Yet, I was so dismissive" (Nichols, 2018, May 9, para. 15-16). Vanessa went on to say: "I needed to stay in the comfort of my denial"—that is, that she understood her own reaction as fearful of what it would mean if her child was transgender—"I couldn't connect with the reality that my child would live a jagged path, one in which he had to fight for basic human rights. I wasn't ready to digest this" (Nichols, 2019, February 15, para. 38).

Witnessing Impacts of Genderism

All four of the parents' narratives documented how genderism influenced their child, as gender was so often at the forefront of their activities and choices, particularly within the school environment. As such, parents described supporting their child while grappling with their own related emotional experiences. For instance, L. wrote: "Q has been anxious about the start of school this year. Not happy for the transition Though he loves it, we know, on some level, that school is hard for Q" ("Back to School", 2012, para. 3). Being aware of the potential challenges Q will face, she tried to remain optimistic, stating; "I'm looking towards tomorrow with hope and trust....and a wee bit of anxiety, awaiting how things turn out 'on the other side'" ("Back to School", 2012, para. 6). Similarly, Marlo expressed her sadness while recounting a

conversation in which her child asked if there was a school she could go to where all the kids were transgender, like her:

I'm pretty sure she has never said anything that made me feel sadder. If I were a crier, I'd have started sobbing. I was just glad that M. couldn't see my face. She doesn't need to bear her mother's sorrow; she needs my help in bearing her own. (Marlo Mack, 2015, January 17, para. 22)

Parents noticed a number of ways in which living in a transphobic society with imposed gender norms impacted their child. In particular, parents observed their child's growing awareness of gender differences, and the ways in which this impacted their sense of self. For instance, Marlo detailed a conversation she had with her child about her grade school crushes, pointing out the possibility that she could marry all the girls as well as all the boys in her class. After reassuring her mom that she wasn't "against gay", her daughter continued, "'But being gay is less usual than girls liking boys. And...I'm already transgender.' [Mom clarifies:] 'So...you don't want to be gay because...it would make you more different?' [Daughter replies:] 'Yeah.'" (Marlo Mack, 2015, January 17, para. 11-15).

Parents observed their children making decisions about their gender expression to be more accepted in certain environments. For example, Sarah wrote about her GNC son: "While Sam won't admit at school that he likes pink things anymore, he still enjoys his pink pajamas at home. [Sam mused]: 'It's dumb that it's OK for girls to wear whatever they want, but it's not OK for boys'" (Sarah Hoffman, 2010, November 14, para. 2). Likewise, L. discussed how gender pressures in the school environment affected her GNC son's fashion choices. She described how, for the past several summers, he tended towards a more typically feminine style, wearing barrettes, nail polish and tight shirts. "I definitely think that he feels a freedom during the

summer without the subtle gaze of peers that occurs each day in school. And I think this has him let down his guard a bit” (“Summer”, 2011, para. 4). In the same manner, Marlo described how genderism influenced the choices that her transgender daughter made in order to have successfully “clawed and scratched her feisty way inside the girl camp” (Marlo Mack, 2014, January 8, para. 6). She reflected on her daughter’s decision-making process, writing, “she’s carefully avoiding any missteps that might result in her expulsion from the girl camp: No pants, no boys at your birthday party” (Marlo Mack, 2014, January 8, para. 25).

Letting Go

Parents grappled with moving between the desire to guide and direct their child’s gender journey, and the need to let go, and to follow their child’s lead in this regard. Accordingly, Sarah detailed the ambiguity that she faced as the parent of a GNC child: “The challenge ... is creating a space for them to grow into who they are, accepting whatever they become, and waiting—patiently—for them to tell us. Just as soon as they figure it out themselves” (Sarah Hoffman, 2009, September 24, para. 5). Correspondingly, L. wrote: “I realize ... how much I have to sit back and let him develop, then offer my love and support.... And I’m just really coming to recognize how hard it is to stand back and let him lead.” She reflected, “I have to hold back on my desire to protect him” (“Happy Mother’s Day”, 2008, para. 3).

In the same vein, Vanessa reflected that her initial reaction to her child’s assertion that he consistently felt like a boy and not a girl was dismissive and (self-)protective: “I thought I knew better than him. A 6-year-old can’t possibly know more about himself than his mother does, right?” (Nichols, 2018, May 9, para. 18). Four years and a social transition later, she offered a different view: “It’s really ok to follow your child’s lead if they’re expressing, consistently and persistently, that they’re a different gender than what they’re assigned.” She continued: “... You

might be beautifully surprised by the discoveries that are made. They know themselves. They truly do. Let them lead with this, you follow” (Nichols, 2018, May 9, paras. 44-46).

Coming Out

Parents described weighing many factors when making decisions about how and when to reveal their child's gender, such as safety, energy, fear of having their parenting judged, and wanting to educate others. L. described the ambiguity and anxiety she experienced when considering correcting her son's teacher, who persistently referred to her child using feminine pronouns. The experience raised a number of questions for L.: “What will she think when it finally sinks in that Q is a boy? Will she treat him differently or think differently about him? What will she think about me? (I know, self-centered. But true.)” (“Coming Out Again and Again and Again”, 2010, paras. 3-5). Moreover, she captured the complexities of the ongoing process of talking with others about her son's gender presentation as she reflected on how each decision she made about coming out was a choice only for that particular moment and context: “I realize that it really is a coming out process each time. And that one really does have to come out over and over and over. And it's never *just* simple. Or easy” (“Coming Out Again and Again and Again”, 2010, January 29, para. 6).

As parents came out and expressed support for their child, they experienced a change in some of their relationships. Some parents expressed feelings of isolation and described losing friends, family, and community since coming out as a parent of a GNC or transgender child. For instance, Vanessa wrote: “My friendships have changed since it's been apparent who my child is and especially since I have written about this topic. Not all friendships, but some. I feel the distance. I feel the chatter behind my back. It's palpable.” She continued: “I don't have many local friends anymore, in this small, conservative area. I notice the lack of Facebook friend

engagements. I notice the lack of invites to social events. It's not in my head. It's real" (Nichols, 2017, November 8, paras. 22-23). Similarly, Sarah, who had reconnected with two long lost friends on Facebook, revealed that after she told them she was writing a blog about her GNC son, their new correspondence quickly evaporated: "Maybe it was a coincidence. Or maybe they got freaked out. Because people sometimes do" (Sarah Hoffman, 2010, October 17, para. 4).

Seeking Knowledge, Creating Community

Parents often lamented about the lack of research and guidance on raising GNC and transgender children. For instance, Sarah wrote about the difficulties of making choices with their GNC son, from the clothes he wears, to which children he plays with, to which bathroom to use at school: "Each choice we make with Sam ... is fraught with questions We plod through them, do our best with each choice, and find, most often, that there are few right answers" (Sarah Hoffman, 2009, September 2, para. 21). Similarly, with regards to parenting a transgender child, Marlo described feeling lost, with few people to turn to for advice:

In nearly every area of my life as a parent to a transgender kid, I'm making this up as I go along. Almost everything we do feels like a first And there is no inter-generational knowledge base. I can't ask my mom or my aunts how they dealt with this issue when they were young mothers thirty years ago. They can't pat me on the hand and say, "Don't worry, honey. Here's how I handled your cousin Billy and look how well he's doing now." (Marlo Mack, 2015, September 8, para. 37)

Further, Marlo reflected on an interview conducted with a leading scholar and researcher on transgender youth, who spoke about the lack of research and knowledge about transgender children and their futures. Marlo mused: "No wonder I'm terrified half the time ... I'm saddened

by the reminder that my child's viability as a mentally healthy human being remains a matter of debate" (Marlo Mack, 2016, March 3, paras. 12-16).

To address the lack of information readily available to them, parents actively worked to increase their knowledge about how to best raise their child. Parents noted that attending conferences specifically devoted to gender-expansive children was a meaningful way of gaining or confirming knowledge and decreasing feelings of isolation. As Marlo expressed after attending a conference: "[Much] of what we hear over the weekend are things that we already know, deep in our hearts and bones, to be true. But it is still a sublime relief to have our parental instincts confirmed by the experts" (Marlo Mack, 2013, August 8, para. 18). As well, the conference sessions seemed to offer parents the knowledge and tools they needed to advocate for their child back at home, as Marlo said of fellow attendees following a discussion about bathroom use at schools: "Pity the principals who will be facing these mothers when school starts this fall!" (Marlo Mack, 2013, August 8, para. 17).

Parents also sought to increase their knowledge and ease isolation by learning about the journeys of other families. For instance, Marlo posted a video about a family's experience of having a transgender child, and wrote: "Lordy, I sobbed my eyes out watching this video just now. So beautiful, so absolutely familiar. These parents have a kid just like mine I'm so grateful to them for sharing this. Wow." (Marlo Mack, 2014, May 30, para. 1). Similarly, Vanessa expressed gratitude for other families who had previously shared their gender journeys, writing: "Because, what if others hadn't shared? Where would we be in this journey?" (Nichols, 2018, May 9, para. 4).

Additionally, authors recognized the importance of the knowledge that was generated, held, and shared by trans communities. For instance, in gratitude, Marlo published a letter to

transgender elders in a popular online magazine (Marlo Mack, 2015, April 3). Vanessa echoed this sentiment of indebtedness to trans youth and adult communities for leading the fight for transgender rights, and for her own education. She wrote:

We have all of these visible trans youth and trans adults and many, many parents that came way before me, and if it wasn't for *them*, I would not even know how [to] *define* transgender. So, if you are [some]one that wants to thank a parent of a trans kid for being supportive of their child, thank a visible trans person instead. They're why I'm here.
(Nichols, 2019, January 29, para. 33)

Connecting with other parents, as well as with members of the trans community, gave parents the opportunity to find commonality with other families, and to build community, diminishing feelings of isolation. Sarah wrote about her experience of meeting other parents at a conference: "I felt as though I were hearing Sam's story, over and over Though we may be the only ones in our schools, our neighborhoods, our towns, we are actually many" (Sarah Hoffman, 2009, September 19, para. 2). Bolstered with a broader knowledge base and a boost in confidence about how best to parent their gender-expansive child seemed to supply parents with what they needed to build safe environments and supportive communities. Parents endeavoured to accomplish this in numerous ways. For example, they met and communicated with school officials and teachers throughout the year, in an attempt to secure safer educational environments for their children. Some spoke with the parents of their child's friends to make sure that their child's gender identity was supported during visits to their home. Speaking out and educating others about her son's gender was key to Sarah, so that gender nonconformity was not invisible or shameful. In her words, "our responsibility is to talk to people. Within the bounds of safety, we need to speak to our families, friends, neighbors, schools, synagogues, churches, the press.

We've got to share our stories, our sons' stories, our families' stories" (Sarah Hoffman, 2010, October 1, para. 7). One parent developed a play group with other gender diverse children and their families, in order to develop community for families like hers (Marlo Mack, 2015, January 17).

Parents performed an incredible amount of labour educating themselves, educating others, and creating community for themselves and their child, and in so doing, came to be seen as resources themselves. For instance, Marlo related a story about her mother calling her on the phone to announce: "'Joan told me that Nancy's grandson just announced that he's a woman ... a transgendered person, like M. The parents are really upset. We need you to help them.' Apparently I've become the local expert on All Things Transgender" (Marlo Mack, 2013, August 20, paras. 3-4). Sarah developed and led a workshop about raising a gender non-conforming child in order to address the gap in knowledge and space devoted to this issue at a gender conference, where, historically, much of the focus had been on transgender children (Sarah Hoffman, 2010, September 7). Additionally, she reported fielding numerous requests from various religious organizations to speak and write on the subject of gender (Sarah Hoffman, 2010, November 18). It is clear that the parents in this study had come to be seen as authorities on the subject. Blog author L. reflected on this role: "I like to think of myself a bit as a hitching post for some folks. A place to rest and gather themselves. To refuel knowing that they are not alone on this path" ("Being an Opening for Others", 2008, para. 3).

Managing Unanticipated Demands

Parents wrote about engaging in the commonplace tasks of parenting to provide and care for their child's welfare, as do most parents and guardians. The parents in this study, however, performed typical parenting tasks while also battling pervasive sociocultural norms that frame

their child's gender expression or identity as perverse, and label parental support of their gender diverse child as transgressive. The parents of gender diverse children reflected on the typical tasks that come with being a parent as well as the ongoing unanticipated demands specifically related to raising a gender diverse child in a transphobic society that insists on hegemonic gender binaries. Vanessa indicated: "[It's a] special kind of tired that parents of transgender kids are experiencing. It's my belief that we, the parents of trans youth, are living in our own marginalized community" (Nichols, 2018, September 21, para. 8). She asked: "Who is leading the fight for trans youth? Parents. All the while, we are simultaneously defending ourselves from hate" (Nichols, 2018, September 21, para. 31). L. conveyed a similar sentiment regarding management of typical parenting tasks as well as tasks specific to raising a gender expansive child: "We spend our days in ... the mundane: school, music practice, swim practice, nudging, coaxing, recovering, laughing. And we spend our days in ways that few others do: navigating bathrooms, considering pronouns, protecting, preparing, choosing just the right outfit" ("Coming Around", 2015, para. 2). Supporting a gender diverse child within a transphobic culture brings with it a host of unanticipated parenting demands, such as navigating one's own emotions and managing the external demands that come from the expectations, judgements, and responses of others.

Emotional Demands

Parents described the emotional demands of raising a gender diverse child. These included fretting about protecting their child, feeling helpless, and for some parents, experiencing loss and grief.

Fretting and Protecting. Parents' increased awareness of societal genderism and the impact that it had on their child resulted in the additional stress of feeling worried or fearful for

their child's emotional, psychological, and physical safety. Specifically, parents discussed the influence of direct and indirect damaging messages to children about acceptable ways to perform masculinity and femininity. While parents tried their best to create supportive environments, they also acknowledged the limitations that they encountered in the world at large. For example, L. explained: "My worry is huge ... because beyond our little world, there's a great big one. The source of that great big tide of societal norms that want to box in my boy" ("OK, OK, OK", 2008, para. 7). L. went on to say: "Right now I just need to admit that I worry a lot. I worry about Q's future, no matter what it holds. I'll support him. But what will he encounter 'out there?' That worries me. A lot. And often" ("Thinking a Lot Lately", 2011, para. 1). Ina. Similar vein, Vanessa discussed her experience of the first time her eight-year-old child was bullied by other children: "I cried and I thought about running away with my child somewhere it feels safer Because I know this won't be the last bullying incident. I knew this was coming and it was the day I dreaded for years" (Nichols, 2018, January 24, paras. 12-13).

The desire to protect their children is evident in the texts of the blog authors. Marlo detailed the efforts that she has made to surround her child with caring and supportive messages about her identity, and to build a world that is welcoming. For example, she described repeatedly coaching family, friends, and educators on how to support her daughter (e.g., Marlo Mack, 2014, February 1; Marlo Mack, 2016, September 6; Marlo Mack, 2017, May 31). She aptly captured the tensions that parents of gender diverse parents seem to face when trying to supportively raise their child in oft hostile environments: "I've tried so hard to strike a balance in my parenting, attempting to ensure my child's safety and privacy without instilling a sense of shame in her trans identity" (Marlo Mack, 2015, September 8, para. 2). In the same post, she promised her child. "I'll never stop fighting for you and for a world in which there is no reason for you to be

afraid” (Marlo Mack, 2015, September 8, para.44). The efforts of shielding her daughter from the transphobic proclivities of a binaristic society have taken an emotional toll that Marlo described:

There is still so much sad and bad news out there. Just about everyday I read an article or hear from friend about a trans kid getting bullied, beaten, abandoned or worse. ... With the world in such a state, it's easy to spend too much time feeling what my daughter calls “sad-mad” (Marlo Mack, 2015, December 18, para. 11).

Parents' desire to protect their gender diverse child is quite evident in their blogs as they describe going to great lengths to create supportive environments. However, the parents also describe experiencing feelings of helplessness, as there is no instruction manual for parents detailing how to ensure their gender diverse child's emotional and physical wellbeing.

Feeling Helpless. A parent is often the most important and influential figure in a young person's life. Although parents are often relied upon to help meet any and all challenges that arise, it is inevitable that parents will not always be able to find resolution for their child's sources of distress. For parents of gender diverse children, feeling helpless seems amplified by the inadequacy of institutional support as well as the absence of intergenerational knowledge and lack of personal experience. Marlo, for instance, described feeling ineffective when trying to explain to her curious daughter the challenges and complexities that transgender people face when using public bathrooms. She wrote, “I kept it vague. ‘Some people are scared of transgender people.’ ‘But why, Mama?’ she asks. ‘What’s scary about me?’ The car gets very quiet. I don’t have an answer” (Marlo Mack, 2017, February 28, paras. 22-24). Further illustrating this point, L. described feeling powerless to help her GNC son, writing: “He’s hurting

in some way and I can't just cuddle him and make it all better. I know that's part of growing up But, as a mom, it's just hard, and it makes my heart hurt" ("Stingy", 2013, paras. 2-3).

Grieving. Unique to the parents of transgender children is the notion of grieving the loss of the son or daughter they had expected to raise. Both mothers raising transgender children expressed feeling this sense of loss. To illustrate, Marlo discussed the implication of her child's gender identity on her own imagined future identities: "I will probably never be a grandmother I had not thought I would be thinking about [this] when my child is still so very young. I suspect we are both growing up a little faster than most" (Marlo Mack, 2013, July 1, para. 7). Vanessa, who expected to raise a girl, expressed feeling sad that her child (prior to transition) did not like stereotypical 'girl' things. At the same time, she describes feeling like a hypocrite with regards to this emotional experience. She explained: "I'm constantly trying to advocate for a society filled with less gender-specific roles and more equality, but you know what? I like make-up and I wish my girl did, too" (Nichols, 2015, July 17, para. 22). In addition, Vanessa describes the process of letting go of hopes, dreams, and identities that parents of transgender children may experience: "We are also having to pack away the child we thought we birthed, the assigned gender of our child, the hopes and dreams we had tied up in that little human" (Nichols, 2018, September 21, para. 41).

At the same time, these parents know that gender identity can be fluid, and they therefore are aware that their child's gender identity may shift again in the future. Marlo detailed her discussion with another parent, thinking through what it would be like to go through the process again, having to explain everything again to relatives, neighbours, teachers, and strangers. However, she said the hardest part about having to do this now would be losing her daughter: "I

already said goodbye to my son ... I don't want to say goodbye to my daughter now" (Marlo Mack, 2014, June 18, para. 12).

External Demands

Adding to the emotional labour of raising a gender diverse child in a gendered society, parents described being confronted with additional external demands in addition to typical parenting tasks. These include additional demands on their time and energy, managing the impact of being blamed or bullied for supporting their child, as well as other safety concerns.

Devoting Time and Energy. Parents described the time and energy it took to manage societal genderism, come out in support of their child, and build the types of knowledge and support that they needed in order to best parent their child. With a finite amount of energy, parents emphasized that working through these processes resulted in having less time to devote to the typical tasks of parenting. For instance, L. expressed this conflict when she described making decisions around talking about her child's gender with others: "I think that you see the tension that I feel sometimes between the need or want to educate, open minds, etc., and the desire sometimes to just BE. Be me, be with my boy" ("A Clarification", 2008, para. 1)

Similarly, Sarah states:

It takes time—time I used to dedicate to work, family, and watching old episodes of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. Of course I want to make Sam's school a safe place for him. Of course I want to build acceptance in the world for him and boys like him. But I did not anticipate how time consuming and emotionally draining this process would be. (Sarah Hoffman, 2011, June 1, para. 3)

Being Blamed, Being Bullied. Parents reported incidents where they were blamed for their child's gender identity and expression, as well as the resultant mistreatment of their child,

particularly via the internet. For example, an old friend of Vanessa's messaged her on Facebook to say that Vanessa was at fault for the bullying her child was experiencing because she "*let her child dress like a boy*" (Nichols, 2018, January 24, para. 25). Similarly, a reader of L.'s blog accused L. (a lesbian mom) of "pushing your own beliefs onto your son.... It seems to me that you WANT your son to be a homosexual or transgendered, and would feel disappointed if he wasn't" ("Both/And", 2008, para. 3). She reflected on her concern that others may perceive that her sexual orientation caused or influenced her son's gender expansiveness:

So, as a lesbian, I fear OFTEN that folks will think that I/my wife and I are trying to turn our son gay/queer/transgendered/etc. Or that my desire to promote understanding and acceptance of queer folks is somehow foisting my son into the spotlight as a mascot for "my cause". ("Both/And", 2008, para. 5)

Often, parent-blaming was also accompanied by gossiping and bullying, and took an emotional and psychological toll. For example, Marlo described learning that over the course of an entire school year, other parents at her school had been talking amongst themselves about her and her child. She indicated: "Every morning at drop-off, every evening at pick-up, every birthday party ... they had smiled and chatted ... and not even once did any of them mention any of their concerns to me. The thought of this makes my skin crawl" (Marlo Mack, 2013, September 23, para. 21). She wondered what the parents were so afraid of, what they were thinking about her and her family, and why the secrecy? She asked why other parents "have a need (and a RIGHT) to know what my child has in her pants? And why is it MY job to explain to them (and make it OK for them, presumably) that people like my child exist?" (Marlo Mack, 2013, September 23, para. 22)

Creating a Sense of Safety. A central concern for all parents in the study was their own personal safety and the safety of their child. L. described an occurrence where she didn't correct a stranger who misgendered her gender expansive son: "It is easy enough for me not to correct others ... I'm protecting those who mistake Q for a girl from the embarrassment of revealing their mistake (as this mistake does seem to cause SUCH embarrassment in the general public)" ("Protecting Them, Protecting Myself", 2008, para. 4). However, upon further reflection, L. revealed that not correcting others was also a way of protecting herself from having to answer questions about why she 'lets' him wear more feminine clothing, and from having to confront negative comments about her parenting regarding her son's gender. This causes a certain tension, L. explains:

So, while I feel justified in protecting myself to a certain extent, it also means I don't have to go out on a limb to expose myself. And in exposing myself, that's where I usually have the chance to broaden minds, to enlarge the territory that boys are seen to inhabit. So there is a cost to the protection. And also a benefit. So, a quandary. Of course. ("Protecting Them, Protecting Myself", 2008, June 30, para. 4)

Marlo struggled with navigating her daughter's gender identity when she was beginning kindergarten at a new school. After crafting a 'safe' community in and outside of preschool where her daughter was surrounded by supportive family and friends, Marlo grappled with how to manage her daughter's identity as she started elementary school, an environment where she didn't have as much control. She pondered the best way to keep her daughter safe at the new school:

How do I suggest to her that she should hide something about herself without, in the act of doing so, introducing a sense of shame? Imagine saying this to your cisgendered

daughter: 'Make sure no one knows you have a vagina, honey. Hide that thing, or people might not like you.' How horrible that sounds! And yet a version of this is exactly what I've considered saying to my child! (Marlo Mack, 2013, July 17, para. 12)

Discussion

As is consistent with the literature, parents in this study experienced a number of iterative processes in order to figure out how to best support their gender diverse child. A predominant process identified in the literature is the negotiation of a range of emotions, moving through confusion and loss to acceptance, as parents become more knowledgeable and comfortable raising their gender-expansive child (Dearden, 2010; Gregor et al., 2015; Malpas, 2011; Möller et al., 2009). The present study, however, emphasizes that these experiences signify a perpetual balancing act. The process of working through emotions is not linear or terminal but rather ongoing and revisited as the child grows. Worry and love, fear and acceptance, loss and joy co-exist at all times. This study also highlights the fact that parents feel isolated and unsupported in a genderist society that offers few resources to parents affirmatively raising a gender diverse child, which results in further unanticipated emotional and external demands on parents. In addition, this study highlights discourses that are influenced by genderist systems of beliefs that parents must navigate when raising a gender-expansive child.

Discourse Analysis

In conjunction with feminist social constructivist epistemology, a Foucauldian discourse analysis (FDA) was conducted for the present study. Discourse analysis is a mechanism to critically analyze social norms and beliefs (Gavey, 1989). The discourse analysis for this study addressed two prominent social norms. First is the implicit social norm in which parenting is viewed as a 'natural' process linked to maternal or paternal 'instincts'. Thus, there is an

expectation that parents should inherently know how to best raise a child. Second, societal gender norms—which dictate the ‘correct’ ways to perform masculinity and femininity in society—continue to be pervasive, rigid, and firmly enforced. Gender norms include beliefs about what behaviours, appearances, and preferences are expected and acceptable for boys or for girls, for men or for women. Such beliefs about gender sanction the notion that those whose gender is diverse are deviant and perverse. These social norms create tension for parents supportively raising a gender-expansive child.

The FDA revealed two parallel processes that parents work through when parenting a gender-expansive child. In the first process, parents move from believing that they should know how to parent their child in every regard, to understanding that they need to let their child take the lead when it comes to the child's gender. In the second process, the parent moves from feeling lost in how to parent a gender diverse child to becoming an authority on parenting their child and a resource for other parents. These two processes occur simultaneously.

You Lead, I Follow

Parents articulated that their initial understanding of parenting was that they were the experts, and as parents, were responsible for guiding their child to learn about themselves, develop social relationships, and become confident, happy people. When parents realized that their child's gender identity or expression was different from what they expected, the idea of parents automatically knowing how to parent was thrown into question. As they gradually discovered, they could not control their child's gender development, nor necessarily answer their child's questions, nor prevent the bitterness of living in a society that reproaches those who push traditional gender boundaries. The realization that, in this domain of parenting, it was best for them to let go and follow their child's lead was not an easy shift, at times. One struggle that

arose in this process was negotiating the need to understand and support their child, while at the same time, managing the impulse to protect them. That is, the parents discussed the ongoing tension between knowing when to provide guidance, versus when to watch, wait and listen.

In addition, parents discussed the internal struggle of coming to terms with the notion that they could not influence their child's gender. As suggested by Ehrensaft (2007) the parents in this study described a process of continually working through their own internalized genderism and resulting gender biases, and ultimately understood that their child was the expert on their own gender identity and gender expression. Throughout this process, however, parents recognized that they could not be that omniscient parent, and ameliorate all their child's distress, which frequently resulted in parents having to balance feelings of helplessness and powerlessness.

I Lead, You Follow

Congruent with the existing literature, parents in this study described having preconceived notions about what raising their child would be like based on their gendered expectations of their child's sex assigned at birth (Eccles et al., 1990). However, when gender differences emerged, parents learned to question limiting, genderist beliefs and began to broaden their notions of gender identity and expression. The two parents of transgender children went through a process of mourning their expectations while simultaneously embracing their child's gender shift.

Additionally, parents in this study distinguished commonplace tasks of parenting from tasks unique to raising a gender diverse child. The labour of caregiving was commonplace when parents could identify that they had intergenerational and personal knowledge as well as systemic support for how to negotiate the many tasks involved in being a loving and responsible

parent. However, when it came to the unique aspects of raising a gender diverse child, they felt isolated and lamented that they did not have intergenerational, personal, or even anecdotal information to guide them on how to best parent their child. Moreover, they were met with uninformed institutional care, including health care and scholastic systems.

Parents seemed to undergo a shift as they learned to parent their gender expansive child in largely unsupportive environments. Parents were required to seek out knowledge and educate themselves through meeting with professionals at conferences, finding resources online, and connecting with trans adults as well as other families embracing gender diverse children. As they became more confident in their knowledge and were tasked with the responsibility for building supportive environments that provided for and protected their child, they necessarily began to open others' eyes about the complexity of gender and the limits of societal norms. As parents found or created the resources they needed, they themselves moved into the role of being a resource to others, and came to be perceived as authorities on the matter of raising gender expansive children.

Follow the Leader

Ultimately, it was holding in balance the simultaneous positions of being both leader and follower, learner and knower, that allowed parents to best parent their child, and to move flexibly within the confines of a rigid gender system. Following their child at times felt counter intuitive to the notion of parent as an instinctual, all-knowing position. Learning to follow their child aided parents in noticing and grappling with the harmful and pervasive genderist system of beliefs at both personal and societal levels. Parents also learned to follow in the footsteps of other families with gender diverse children, as well as transgender adults. The processes that parents went through to gain knowledge and confidence in raising their child were complex,

ever-changing, and evolving over time. While these iterative processes entailed great emotional, physical, and psychological labour, parents advocated for safer spaces for their child, built community, and became resources themselves. Building new ways of parenting gender diverse children, of both following and leading, not knowing and knowing, pushes the boundaries of the discourses on parenting as instinctive and on gender as limited and finite.

Summary and Conclusions

Most of the extant literature on gender diverse youth focuses on the experiences of the child, with little attention given to the parents. This study provides a unique, longitudinal perspective of the processes that parents experience as they raise a transgender or gender diverse child, while deconstructing the idea that these processes are terminal in nature. This study identified the intrapersonal and interpersonal challenges with which parents are confronted when trying to provide a healthy and safe environment for their child. Further, it illuminated several discourses with regards to parenting a gender diverse child in order to understand that parents hold simultaneous positions of leading and following.

Strengths and Limitations

The results of this research are limited in their scope, given the geographic constraints and small homogeneous sample of parents who choose to blog about their experiences of raising a gender diverse child. Moreover, as the parents in the current study affirmed their child's gender identities and expressions, the findings and recommendations may not be transferable to all parents of gender diverse children. Nonetheless, this study may offer some insight to individuals aiming to raise a gender diverse child in a gender-affirmative environment. Furthermore, the longitudinal nature of the data allowed for an exploration of the processes that parents engage with over time, giving insight into the iterative and complex nature of parenting in general and

experience of parenting gender-diverse children in particular. Additionally, a strength of the study lies in the fact that data was unsolicited and came solely from parenting blogs.

Uninfluenced by researcher-led inquiry, this study highlights the information salient to the parents.

Implications for Counselling and Psychotherapy

The present findings provide a more nuanced understanding of the iterative processes that parents may experience when parenting a gender diverse child, and can offer insight to counsellors and psychotherapists working with such parents. Counsellors should be attuned to the fact that parents of gender expansive children can accept their child's gender while struggling with their own genderism. Parental support of a gender expansive child and continually working through gender biases are not mutually exclusive, but rather ongoing processes that inform one another. Additionally, counsellors should be prepared to acknowledge the unexpected demands and emotional toll that some parents may experience while raising a gender expansive child, including being scrutinized and blamed for their parenting, feeling uncertain about their parenting, and relatedly, experiencing feelings of worry and helplessness. Thus, the role of the counselling psychologist working with families with gender diverse children is to assist parents in supporting the child's development. It may be helpful to situate their experiences of trying to be the best parent for their child within the competing hegemonic discourses around parenting and gender. This may take the form of forging new parenting paths where few exist, helping parents find comfort in becoming both leaders and followers.

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Link Between Manuscripts One and Two

Study one focused on the experiences of parents who are affirmatively raising a gender diverse child. Using a narrative-informed thematic analysis, this study identified the intrapersonal and interpersonal challenges with which parents are confronted when trying to provide a healthy and safe environment for their child. Additionally, this research pointed to some of the systemic barriers to affirmatively parenting a gender diverse child, such as pervasive societal genderism, inadequate and inaccessible knowledge and resources, as well as a lack of community. During the course of the analysis, it became clear that through the creation and maintenance of their blog, bloggers were responding to some of the needs identified in study one. Additionally, the blog authors provided a critique of the ways in which their families, - and families like theirs, who affirm their gender diverse children - were excluded and de-prioritized from genderist society. Thus, study two builds on the finding of study one by investigating the function of blogging for parents who are affirmatively raising a gender diverse child. This study employed a narrative-informed thematic analysis, and situated the results in the frameworks of transformative gender justice and mediated kinship.

Chapter 5: Manuscript 2

“Keyboard Warriors Unite!”:

Blogging as a Form of Activism Amongst Parents of Gender Diverse Children

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Abstract

Raising a gender diverse child in a world that promotes and sanctions binary conceptions of gender is often an unexpected and challenging experience for parents. This qualitative longitudinal study investigated the function of blogging for parents who write about affirmatively raising a gender diverse child. A narrative-informed thematic analysis was applied to four blogs located in the public domain and written by mothers who were parenting a pre-teen gender diverse child. Results revealed how parents used the blogging platform to engage in parental advocacy and activism. Various themes emerged from data analysis, including motives to create and maintain blogs, and methods of promoting change through knowledge sharing and modelling actions of change. Moreover, analysis of the blogs revealed the importance of the creation and maintenance of online community. Results were interpreted through the lenses of mediated kinship and transformative gender justice.

Keywords: gender diverse child, gender-affirmative parenting, blogging, advocacy, activism, transformative gender justice, mediated kinship

The idea that gender is binary and that individuals can and should be categorized as male or female predominates modern Western discourse on gender. In this view, gender identity is presumed to develop in accordance with one's sex assigned at birth (established through a cursory evaluation of a newborn's genitalia). Based on this assumption, then, a child born with a penis is labelled as boy and is expected to develop male identities and assume masculine characteristics, while a child born with a vulva is classified as girl and expected to develop female identities and assume feminine characteristics (Kessler & McKenna, 1978; Money & Ehrhardt, 1972; Zucker & Bradley, 1995). The notion of a binary categorization system is so entrenched in the West that many social rules have developed with regards to gender, including expected attire and presentation, preferred activities, emotional expression, and career choices, to name but a few.

As a result of discrimination based on rigid gender norms, adults who do not fall within the gender binary often face various forms of violence (Kenagy & Bostwick, 2005; Stotzer, 2009; Xavier et al., 2005). Similarly, gender diverse children and youth, who challenge and question the limits of an externally imposed binary understanding of gender, are also frequently the targets of abuse and bullying (D'Augelli et al., 2006; Wyss, 2004). D'Augelli et al. (2006) report that verbal harassment of gender diverse children due to divergent-from-the-norm gender presentation can begin as early as age six, and physical attacks as early as age eight. Gender diverse children and youth experience difficult peer relationships and harassment at school at alarming rates (Cohen-Kettenis et al., 2003; McGuire et al., 2010). It is well established in the literature that childhood bullying due to gender non-conformity results in long-lasting negative mental health and psychosocial adjustment outcomes during childhood, adolescence, and young

adulthood (Carver et al., 2003; Kosciw et al., 2012; Kosciw et al., 2018; Toomey et al., 2013; Wallien et al., 2007; Yunger et al., 2004).

Parental support appears to provide significantly protective effects against the victimization of gender diverse children (Hill & Menvielle, 2009). In fact, gender diverse children who are supported in their identities report levels of self-worth and of depression on par with their cis-gender peers, and only slightly higher levels of anxiety (Olson et al., 2016; Durwood et al., 2017). At the same time, emergent literature on parenting gender diverse children reveals that parents who affirm their child's gender often face unique challenges. Upon learning about their child's gender expressions and/or identities, parents may experience difficult emotions such as confusion, (Cooper, 1999; Gray et al., 2016; Johnson & Benson, 2014; Kuvalanka, et al. 2014; Lev, 2004), shame, guilt, and self-blame (Boenke, 2008; Johnson & Benson, 2014; Kuvalanka et al., 2014; Lev, 2004; Pyne, 2016), grief (Menvielle & Tuerk, 2002; Norwood, 2012; Wren, 2002), and fear and anxiety (Ehrensaft, 2011b; Hill & Menvielle, 2009; Katz-Wise et al., 2017; Lev, 2004; Pyne, 2016; Ryan, 2010; Pullen Sansfaçon et al. 2015). It is worth noting, however, that not all parents of gender diverse children experience negative emotions when learning of their child's gender expressions and/or identities (e.g., Boenke, 2008; Ehrensaft, 2011a; Pepper, 2012).

Some parents who affirm their child's gender diversity report encountering secondary stigma or blame for their child's gender expression, and may also experience the loss of family, friends, or community (Johnson & Benson, 2014; Zamboni, 2006). It follows, then, that feelings of isolation are frequently reported by parents raising gender diverse children (Menvielle & Tuerk, 2002; Pullen Sansfaçon et al., 2015; Wren, 2002). Moreover, parents describe difficulty in finding support and information about how to best raise their gender diverse child (Pullen

Sansfaçon et al., 2015; Riley et al., 2013). Relatedly, mental, physical, and social service professionals are often inexperienced with gender diversity and do not possess the requisite knowledge to offer affirming care to gender diverse children and their families (Bauer et al., 2009; Menvielle & Tuerk, 2002; Minter & Keisling, 2010). Likewise, teachers and administrators often lack the knowledge and institutional supports necessary to best provide for the needs of gender diverse children at school (Kosciw et al., 2018).

In sum, parents who affirmatively raise gender diverse children must often work through their own negative emotions related to their child's gender expression or identity, while also potentially contending with the negative reactions of others. The lack of public support for gender diverse children and the scarcity of institutional knowledge and resources related to affirmative parenting practices creates challenges unique to raising a gender diverse child. In fact, current attitudes towards and treatment of gender diverse children and their families suggests that these families are not recognized, prioritized, or valued. Ultimately, a lack of societal understanding and scarcity of institutional supports puts these families at a disadvantage and creates barriers to affirmatively parenting happy and healthy gender diverse children.

Transformative Gender Justice

Transformative gender justice provides a framework through which to better understand the societal and institutional challenges faced by families with gender non-conforming and/or transgender members. Drawing from critical race, feminist, and trans theory as well as anti-capitalist scholarship, Travers (2008) expands Fraser's (2007) notion of gender justice for women to a transformative gender justice (TGJ) framework, inclusive of gender diverse identities (Travers, 2018). TGJ recognizes the limitations of a rigid binary gender system as well as the societal norms and structures that have developed based on this system. The TGJ

framework also identifies intersectional sociocultural inequalities, such as income disparity and social class, racialization, and sexism, as problematic external conditions, rather than locating the dysfunction within the gender diverse individual.

An important element of the TGJ framework is Fraser's notion of "participatory parity", which suggests that justice can occur only when sociocultural conditions enable equal participation from all members of society (Fraser & Liakova, 2008). Applied to a TGJ framework, participatory parity calls for a transformation of the neo-liberal systems that create and enforce sanctioned gender identities and expressions. Travers (2018) holds that the enforcement of a rigid binary system of gender hinders all people, and thus proposes that "efforts to advance the gender spectrum as the norm [as opposed to the gender binary], is a pro-active and structural way of working toward inclusion for transgender and gender-variant children and youth" (p. 63). Moreover, because the gender binary and intertwined systems of racialization and economic inequality are detrimental to all individuals, the TGJ framework entails advocating for changes that will benefit everyone (Travers, 2018). These efforts include building environments that are inclusive of many diverse, intersecting identities, only one of which is gender. Travers (2018) points to public institutions such as schools, health and social services, criminal justice systems, and sports as potential sites for advocacy and rehabilitation.

Advocacy and Activism

One of the emergent themes in the literature on affirmative parenting of gender diverse children is the lack of societal and institutional knowledge and support for gender diverse children and their families (Ehrensaft, 2011b; Grossman et al., 2006; Riley et al., 2011). These shortcomings are widespread and extend across school policies, health care, and governmental measures (Pullen Sansfaçon et al., 2015). As parents come to the realization that these deficits

are systemic (i.e., that they lie outside of the parent and their child) they are often moved to instigate systemic change (Brill & Pepper, 2008). Thus, to ensure that the needs of their children are met, parents of gender diverse children may find themselves taking on the role of advocate and activist (Manning, 2017; Meadow, 2018; Riley et al., 2011). While there is no universally accepted definition of activism or advocacy in the literature, for the purposes of this paper “activism” will be broadly defined as distinct actions that are performed to promote a cause (Martin, 2007), and “advocacy” will be defined as acting or speaking on behalf of another person or group in order to advance their preferences and/or needs (Wolfensberger, 1977). Thus, parents who affirm their child's gender diversity may not only advocate on behalf of their own child, but may also take action to promote broader social change on issues related to gender expression and identity. Correspondingly, in their qualitative action research study of parents who support their child's gender diversity, Pullen Sansfaçon et al. (2015) found that a predominant motive for parents to engage in activist work on behalf of their gender diverse child was the absence of recognition, support, or leadership from government and the public sector at large. The parents involved in the latter study engaged in actions to improve the quality of life for their child and family, such as creating and distributing resources for other parents and creating online or in-person networking and support groups (Pullen Sansfaçon et al., 2015). Further, these parents petitioned government bodies to recognize and protect all gender identities (Pullen Sansfaçon et al., 2015).

Some scholars have recognized that social location influences who is able to engage in such acts of advocacy and activism (Manning, 2017; Manning et al., 2015; Rahilly, 2015; Travers, 2019). In her exploration of the roles of emotion and family ties in parent advocacy, Manning (2017) noted that dominant forces of gender, class, and race shape who is excluded

from advocacy work. She aptly states, “publicly tackling transphobia is only possible for those who can afford the costs of time, labour, finances, and risk” (Manning, 2017, p. 584). The authors Manning et al. (2015) explored their personal experiences of parent activism through this lens, reporting that while their social location as academics provided a privileged platform from which to advocate for their gender diverse children, by publicly speaking out on their children’s behalf they also became targets of discrimination. They described their activist work, however, as non-negotiable, involving “[living] a commitment to our children that cannot be picked up or put down as we like” (Manning et al., 2015, p. 119). This conceptualization undergirds what Manning (2017, p. 580) terms “attached advocacy”, which refers to the unique enactment of intimate familial bonds (i.e., the emotional aspects of parenting) in the political sphere (i.e., parents advocating for the rights of their gender diverse child).

Blogging

Activism and advocacy can take many forms. With the advent and rise in popularity of online social platforms, new opportunities for digital connection, advocacy, and activism have become available through platforms/tools such as social media, online forums, and blogs. Blogging, in particular, has become an important and accessible platform for documenting the experiences of individuals with identities outside of the idealized hegemonic norm, in respect to gender, race, sexual orientation, or ability, for example (e.g., Gabriel, 2016; Hunter, 2015). Moreover, blogs provide the potential for connection and community building for individuals who experience barriers to meeting others with similar experiences in person (Olson, 2007).

As described by Nardi et al. (2004), blogs are websites that are regularly updated, typically containing archival entries, or “posts”, which are most often organized in reverse-chronological order so that the newest content appears first. Blogs are typically text based, and

may also contain other media (e.g., images, video, audio) embedded within the text (Blood, 2002). Individuals are motivated to keep blogs for a wide variety of reasons. Authors report multiple and concomitant motivations to blog, including documenting one's life, providing opinions, expressing emotions, articulating ideas through writing, forming and maintaining community forums/social networking, advertising/promoting, or as a creative outlet (Nardi et al., 2004; Birnkrant & Przeworski, 2017).

The internet has historically provided distinct opportunities of particular importance among transgender communities for connection and knowledge sharing. For example, electronic mailing lists known as listserves, and public discussion forums, or message boards, have provided virtual spaces for transgender people to offer and receive support, to educate, and to learn from one another, during an era when access to other transgender people was limited (Shapiro, 2004, 2010; Whittle, 1998). Blogs offer similar means for connection and knowledge-sharing. Blog authors can choose to enable interaction with readers by allowing readers to publicly post comments in response to blog posts. Comments typically appear directly below a blog post and are published in chronological order. The blog author and other readers can also post replies to readers' comments. By allowing and replying to comments, the blog author provides a space for readers to actively contribute to the conversation. In this model, both commentors and authors produce and consume information in relationship with one another, becoming, to use the term employed by Ritzer and Jurgenson, (2010; see p. 19 for a discussion of online prosumption), "prosumers" of the blog—that is, both producers and consumers of its content.

Blogs are a digital medium, offering a platform where authors can share their thoughts and experiences through self-publication of text as well as audio and visual means. As such, it is

not surprising that blogs have become a place of documentation, knowledge sharing, education, and creative expression. Additionally, blogs provide a space for interaction with readers who comment, offering a means for connecting with others. To date, the role of blogging for parents supporting gender diverse children has been the subject of relatively little study. Thus, the present study aims to analyze the function of blogging for parents who maintain blogs about affirmatively raising gender diverse children.

Terminology

Gender is best conceived of as a spectrum with infinite possibilities for gender identity expression. The terminology of gender identity is important as a means of self-determination and representation, and as an ever-evolving expression of self. Identity terms may be as numerous and diverse as the individuals who choose them, and it is crucial that how individuals choose to identify is respected. Terminology used in this paper is guided by Keo-Meier and Ehrensaft's (2018) conceptualizations. *Transgender* is a term that encompasses the identities of those whose internal felt sense of gender is different than the sex they were assigned at birth (Keo-Meier & Ehrensaft, 2018). This term is often (but not exclusively) used by individuals who wish to transition or who have transitioned from one binary gender identity to another, for example from boy to girl or vice versa, and also may be used by those with non-binary identities. Whereas gender identity is invisible, *gender expansiveness* in children is discerned through preferences, demeanors, roles, and expressions. A gender expansive child's behaviours and presentations, in part or in whole, are not what is culturally and socially expected based on their sex assigned at birth. These children are often called "tomboys" or "pink boys" (Keo-Meier & Ehrensaft, 2018, p.8). The term *gender diverse* is used as an umbrella term to represent any gender identities or

expressions that defy or challenge the limitation of an imposed binary conception of gender and includes both gender expansive and transgender identities (Keo-Meier & Ehrensaft, 2018).

While describing the function of blogging for parents who maintain blogs about affirmatively raising gender diverse children, this paper adheres to the verbatim language used by the blog authors to describe their children, which, unsurprisingly, sometimes changed over time as their child's identity, and their understanding of their child's identity, evolved. However, outside of direct quotation, we based our terminology on the parents' most recent blog posts so that the children's current identities, as conveyed by their affirming parents, are respected. Accordingly, in the four blogs studied, two children are identified as transgender, (e.g., Marlo Mack, n.d., para 1; Nichols, n.d., para 5) one as gender non-conforming (GNC; e.g., Sarah Hoffman, n.d., para. 1), and one as "a boy who eschews many social 'boy' labels" (e.g., "About/Why blog", n.d.). GNC is a term often used to describe those whose gender expression does not align with societal expectations of their sex assigned at birth, and thus, for the purposes of this paper, falls under the umbrella of the term gender expansive, as defined above. The gender identity of the "boy who eschews many social 'boy' labels" ("About/Why blog", n.d.) is also, for the purposes of this paper, understood to be in line with a gender expansive conceptualization.

Method

Epistemology

To examine four blogs of parents affirmatively raising a gender diverse child, this study employed a feminist social constructivist (FSC) epistemology and longitudinal qualitative research design. FSC is an anti-oppressive epistemological framework that is based on the following three main assumptions: (a) that multiple realities exist; (b) that knowledge is co-

constructed; and (c) that gender is performative (Gergen, 1985; Parton, 2003; Sprague, 2005).

These tenets that form the basis of FSC epistemology facilitate exploration of how parents of gender diverse children use blogging to perform advocacy. First, FSC holds that individuals are experts on their own identities and lived experiences, and that multiple identities and experiences can exist simultaneously (Haverkamp & Young, 2007; Ponterotto, 2005; Raskin, 2002).

Research thus far has predominantly focused on the experiences of gender diverse children, whereas this study prioritizes the distinct experiences of the parents raising these children. The inclusion of and emphasis on multiple realities recognizes that parents of gender diverse children have meaningful experiences with unique perspectives on the phenomena of gender diverse children and their families. Second, congruent with the tenet of the co-construction of knowledge, FSC researchers consider themselves to be active participants in co-constructing meaning with the research participant (Haverkamp & Young, 2007). Third, the assumption that gender is a verb or is something that one performs is very pertinent to this work, as it underlines the social construction of gender and troubles the socially prescribed rules that enforce gender norms, and acknowledges that gender performance is shaped by shifting contexts and social power dynamics (Sinacore & Enns, 2005). Finally, in line with the anti-oppressive nature of FSC, this study examines the practice of blogging by parents of gender diverse children by attending to the systemic challenges that parents of gender diverse children encounter.

Methodology

The stories that people tell allow them to interpret and make meaning from their lived experience. Thus, these stories are also expressions about who they are and the world in which they live (Bamburg, 2012; Clandinin, 2006). Narrative methodology is the “study of experience as it is lived” (Clandinin & Rosiek, 2007, p. 69) and simultaneously attends to three dimensions

or 'commonplaces': temporality, sociality and spatiality (Clandinin and Rosiek, 2007). Using a narrative approach to studying the function of blogging for parents raising a gender diverse child allowed for the observation of the unfolding of experience over time, including the interactions and influence of personal and social conditions within the realm of the blog platform, located in cyberspace.

Procedure

The blogs included in this study were identified through purposive selection, that is, through the deliberate selection of sources expected to provide researchers with rich description of the topic of study (Morrow, 2005; Polkinghorne, 2005; Wertz, 2005). In the context of the current study, blogs that detailed the experience of affirmatively parenting a gender diverse child were identified by performing a Google search pairing the terms "blog" and "parenting" or "raising" with each of the following terms: "trans child", "transgender child", "gender non-confirming child", "gender diverse child", "gender expansive child", and "gender creative child". Additional blogs were located by examining blog rolls—authors' lists of links to recommended blogs—on each of the websites identified by the original search. This investigation yielded a total of 18 blogs, predominantly written by mothers residing in the United States and raising a gender diverse child ranging in age from 3–21 years old.

To be included in the study, blogs were required to meet certain criteria in order to capture similarities across the contexts of space, time, and stages of parenting. For example, to reflect the experiences of parents over time, blogs had to meet the criteria of being maintained over a number of years and including a minimum number of distinct posts. Additionally, to capture similar stages of parenting, it was decided that the author's children should be in comparable stages of development. It has been well documented that the needs and

experiences of gender diverse children change significantly when they reach adolescence (Cohen-Kettenis et al., 2008; de Vries et al., 2011), thus we determined that the children in the blogs be elementary school aged. Criteria for inclusion specified that: a) all blog authors must reside in the same country; b) the children featured in the blogs were elementary school aged at the time of writing; c) posts were written over the course of four or more years; d) blogs included a minimum of 50 discrete posts; e) posts were written in close temporal proximity to one another; f) the parent authoring the blog expressed support for their gender diverse child; g) the blog was published in the public domain; and h) the blog was written in English. Out of the 18 blogs initially identified, four met all inclusion criteria. The four blogs selected for study were written between 2008 and 2019, and the number of distinct posts in each blog ranged from 52 to 121. Summary descriptions of the blogs and their authors are provided in the following section.

Data

Labels are for Jars: Words on the Journey of Raising a Boy Who Eschews Many Social “Boy” Labels, and Empowering Him Along the Way

(<http://www.labelsareforjars.wordpress.com/>). This blog (2015) was authored by a queer white woman who lives with her wife and two children in or near Boston, Massachusetts. She is the mother of a “gender-boundary-pushing son” (“Blogging for LGBT Families”, 2008, para. 3) who she identifies using the initial “Q”. Her blog entries span from 2008–2015, while her child was between the ages of five and 12 years old. The author doesn’t reveal her name or use a pseudonym, so for the purposes of this paper she will be identified as “L.” Numerous photos of L. and her son are posted on the blog.

Sarah & Ian Hoffman (<http://www.sarahandianhoffman.com/blog/>). “Sarah Hoffman” is a pseudonym under which the author wrote this blog about her experiences of

raising her “gender-nonconforming” (GNC) son, “Sam” (Hoffman & Hoffman, n.d., About us, para. 1). She is a Jewish woman raising two children with her husband in the San Francisco Bay area, where she writes and speaks publicly about her parenting experiences. Sarah and her husband have collaboratively written two children’s books featuring a GNC boy. The blog was primarily active from 2009–2014, while Sam was aged 7–12. There are no photos of Sarah or her family posted on the blog.

Gendermom: A Chronicle of Fun and Fear, Or, Daily Life with my Young Trans Daughter (<http://www.gendermom.wordpress.com/>). The author of this blog writes under the pseudonyms “Gendermom”, and more recently, “Marlo Mack” (e.g., Marlo Mack, n.d.). Marlo co-parents her transgender daughter with her ex-husband in the United States (the state isn’t mentioned). A journalist by trade, her blog is devoted to her experiences of raising a transgender child, who she identifies using the initial “M.”. Marlo has also created a podcast on the subject. The blog posts included in this study date from 2013–2019, while her daughter was between five and 11 years old. There are no photos of Marlo or her family posted on the blog.

Vanessa Lee Nic: Writer of Life. Advocate. Activist. Ally. (<http://www.vanessaleenic.com/>). This blog was authored by Vanessa Nichols, who resides in southwest Florida, where she co-parents her trans son with her ex-husband. The blog posts included in the study span from 2014–2019, while her child was between five and 10 years old. During this period her son transitioned, so Vanessa used the pronouns she/her in earlier blog posts and he/him in later blog posts. This manuscript uses he/him pronouns to respect her son’s current gender identity, with the exception of verbatim quotations predating his transition. Vanessa also hosts a podcast devoted to her experiences of raising a transgender child. Notably, Vanessa does not use a pseudonym and includes photos of herself and her son in her blog posts.

Considerations for Using Blogs as Data

There is ongoing debate on the subject of using online content as research data. Specifically, discussion centers on whether online content should be considered research on human subjects or study of cultural artefacts. In the case of blogs, the question is whether blogs should be equated with interview data, thus requiring the author's consenting participation, or more akin to cultural production, like self-published articles, in which case authors should be properly credited for their work (Von Benzon, 2019). Consideration of online content creators as human subjects in research settings may mitigate any harm caused by increased attention to the online work or its author. Conversely, not crediting online content creators for their cultural production may devalue the work. Von Benzon (2019) has suggested that online content creators are competent and agential actors, engaged in self-publication. Similarly, Bassett and O'Riordan (2002) argued that online publishing presents an opportunity for individuals and groups to increase control over their presented narrative, visibility, and self-determination. This may be especially empowering and important for members of certain identity groups whose lived experiences and identities are diminished by dominant societal narratives (e.g., LGBTQ+ communities; Bassett & O'Riordan, 2002). For this study, blogs were interpreted as cultural artefacts and their authors as knowledgeable and capable actors whose work should be properly credited.

Regardless of the classification of blogs used in research as human subjects research or as cultural artefacts, Eastham (2011) suggests the author's intention of privacy must also be considered. She posits that the private or public nature of a blog can be gleaned through the choices the blog creator makes when setting up their online space. Thus, each blog was reviewed to understand the authors choices regarding: a) indexing for search, b) limiting to cache, c)

password requirements, d) allowing comments, e) providing RSS feed, and f) reasons for blogging. This examination revealed that all four blogs had been indexed for search, were not limited to cache, did not require the use of a password, encouraged commenting by readers, and provided an RSS feed or other ways to easily follow the blog. An investigation of the authors' motives for blogging affirmed that education and community building were key themes, both of which require a public audience. Thus, in accordance with Eastham's (2011) framework, all four blogs in the study were determined to be public in nature.

Data Analysis

A narrative-informed thematic approach was used to analyze the data. Thematic analysis is a process of identifying, interpreting, and recording patterns across a data set (Braun & Clarke, 2006) while attending to the narrative commonplaces of temporality, sociality, and spatiality. Employing a thematic approach to analyzing the blogs of parents who affirm their child's gender identity is consistent with an FSC epistemological framework, as it enabled the researchers to attend to the sociocultural conditions and structural frameworks that informed the analyzed texts. Additionally, engaging in thematic analysis from an FSC foundation facilitated the examination of the co-construction of knowledge by blog authors and commenters within the blog format. All blog posts included in the analysis were downloaded into the qualitative data analysis software NVIVO, and analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2006, 2012) six phase recursive process: (a) familiarization with the data, (b) generating initial codes, (c) searching for themes, (d) reviewing themes, (e) defining and naming themes, and (f) producing a report. Results are interpreted using the frameworks of transformative gender justice and mediated kinship.

Credibility and Trustworthiness

Establishing the trustworthiness and credibility of data analysis (that is, ensuring the accurate representation of data), is a crucial part of the qualitative research process. This study utilized several techniques to uphold rigour, including reflexivity, dependability, verification, and catalytic validity.

It is imperative that researchers be aware of the manner in which their own life experiences, beliefs and social location affect the research process (Morrow, 2005). To counter the effects of personal bias, the primary researcher's reflective practice included recording thoughts and reactions as they arose throughout the research process. Further, any recurring themes were debriefed with a fellow doctoral candidate, with the objective of attending to researcher bias in order to safeguard the soundness of the research process. Additionally, both researchers together engaged in a reflective process at each stage of the work in an attempt to uncover and understand the influence of their subjective stances and unique social locations. For example, the primary researcher continually examined how not being a parent impacted her readings and interpretations of the parent blogs.

Dependability aims to ensure that the methods used for data analysis and interpretation are straightforward and transparent (Morrow, 2005). To ensure the dependability of this study, as suggested by Morrow (2005) and Shenton (2004), the primary researcher kept a detailed and chronological record of all research activities. This research record was particularly useful in meetings between the primary and secondary researcher who served as an auditor of the analytic process, ensuring sound and accurate interpretation of the data.

Finally, catalytic validity refers to the degree to which engaging in the research process is meaningful and transformative for research participants in terms of enhancing their understanding of themselves and their experiences (Kincheloe & McLaren, 2011; Lather, 1991).

While it was impossible to confirm catalytic validity by asking the blog authors about their experience, even a cursory reading of the blogs reveals that the process of recording their experiences in the blog format was a meaningful practice for the blog authors. For example, one blog author wrote: "I blog, honestly, as an exercise in expanding my own compassion, open-mindedness, and understanding" ("Bloggng for LGBT Families", 2008, para. 6).

Results

Analysis of the blogs revealed overlapping reasons for parents to create and maintain a blog about raising their gender diverse child. As parents realized that there was a lack of visibility, knowledge, and community for families like theirs, they used their blogs to promote change. Through their blogs, parents raised awareness and encouraged readers to take action in support of gender diverse children and their families. Moreover, the blogs seemed to arise in part out of a need to give and receive support and connect with others. Analysis of the blogs revealed the ways in which the blogs provided the opportunity for online community building. The themes and subthemes generated from the data (see Table 2) included: motivation to blog, methods of promoting change, sharing knowledge, modelling and encouraging action, and creating community.

Motivation to Blog

Authors cited diverse reasons for starting and maintaining a blog. Personal motivating factors included blogging as a means to: a) document and illuminate experiences; b) solicit feedback and support from readers; and c) support and connect with others. Reflecting on her reasons for blogging, L. illustrated these motivating factors: "I blog as a way of making my family visible and building support out in the world for others like us. I blog to create a closer-knit 'family'/community around us for the moms and our boy" ("Bloggng for LGBT Families",

Table 2

Summary of Themes and Sub-Themes of the function of blogging for parents who write about affirmatively raising a gender diverse child

Themes	Sub-Themes
1. Motivation to blog	
2. Methods of promoting change	(a) Sharing knowledge <ul style="list-style-type: none"> (i) Confronting stereotypes, dispelling myths (ii) Sharing resources, creating resources (b) Modelling and encouraging action <ul style="list-style-type: none"> (i) Reducing isolation (ii) Sharing vulnerability and validation (iii) Changing minds (c) Creating community

2008, para. 6). Documenting their experiences in blog format was a way for these mothers to affirm their own existence as parents and families supportively raising a gender diverse child. Blogging also provided opportunities for connection, support, and community building. The motivation to connect with others was evident in another post by L. in which she discussed her feelings about learning how to best raise her gender diverse child. She expressed her desire to connect with others in order to find support and wisdom within the blogging community, and she utilized the interactive nature of the blog to do so, in the form of a request: "I hope you'll join me, because this surely is not a journey to embark upon alone. It takes many strong and steadfast partners, for sure. And please add your wisdom at every turn. I rely on it" ("About/Why blog", n.d.). Providing support for others was a motivating factor for Marlo, and another means of creating community. She explained that her decision to devote much of her time to blogging and producing a podcast about affirmatively raising her child was, in large part, motivated by positive feedback from her readers, coupled with her desire to help others through telling her story. She wrote, "I believe that life has presented me and my daughter with a pretty amazing opportunity to be of service to others while doing something we love" (Marlo Mack, 2018, July 4, para. 4).

While the blog authors described various personal incentives to blog, one common motive shared by all the authors was the desire to create change through their writing. The authors seemed to understand that the difficulties of raising a gender diverse child were not located within the child or family, but rather stemmed from rigid sociocultural gender norms. For example, Sarah expressed her anger and sadness that "Sam has to do the work to change society, every time he comes up against one of the limits of 'acceptable' gender expression" (Sarah

Hoffman, 2011, para. 3). Blogging provided the authors with a forum to raise awareness about issues related to gender and affirmatively parenting gender diverse children. For instance, Vanessa seemed to view her blog as a place where she had agency to educate people about gender diversity, and believed that doing so would make for a better world. She explained: “I will use my writing as a super power of education and plea for kindness. And hope for a day where acceptance is commonplace and bullies have no place ... A mama can hope. A mama will fight” (Nichols, 2018, January 24, paras. 31-33). L. also expressed the desire to use her blogging platform to broaden minds through sharing her writing:

I write this blog to open minds a bit, to change minds a bit, to “trouble” the norms that we have ALL become so comfortable with [This blog] exists to make us all fidget a bit in our seats, to reconsider our expectations around gender to make a bit of change.

(“Troubling our Comfortable Norms”, 2009, para. 5)

Sarah found that her blog allowed her writing to reach a large audience:

I would like to reach as many people as I can with a message of acceptance for gender-nonconforming kids. Of course this means that I want to find more allies—but I also want to reach out to people who have never thought about the ideas I talk about on my blog pages. (Sarah Hoffman, 2010, December 9, para. 2)

In summary, the four authors exhibited diverse personal motivations for writing their blogs, as well as a common desire to use their blogging platforms as a means to create change at the societal level in support of their gender diverse child.

Methods of Promoting Change

While the impulse to create change was a significant motivating factor for all four authors, they each endeavored to do so differently, employing a variety of techniques via their

blogging platform. Methods used by the authors to promote change included: a) sharing knowledge; b) modeling and encouraging action; and c) creating community.

Sharing Knowledge

Parents used their writing to promote change through sharing knowledge with their readers. Sharing knowledge primarily took two forms: confronting stereotypes and dispelling myths about gender diverse children and their families; and publicizing and creating resources.

Confronting Stereotypes, Dispelling Myths. As the four mothers detailed their journeys of raising a gender diverse child, they wrote about their own growing awareness of the ways in which strict societal gender norms (e.g., the assumption that girls like pink and playing with dolls, or that boys have short hair and like sports) are enforced. The blog authors reflected on their learning, shared their growing understanding of the issues, and called attention to the insidious and harmful messages that were abundant in their everyday lives.

As L.'s recognition of gender stereotyping broadened, she coined the term "gender funneling", offering readers a new way to understand the enactment of gender stereotypes ("Gender Funneling", 2008, para. 1). She described gender funneling as: "Actions that serve to constrict the choices available to children because of their sex. Actions [that] ascribe certain identities, proclivities, and interests to children because of their sex" ("Gender Funneling", 2008, para. 2). This definition implies that gender stereotyping is something that is done to children in order to limit their behaviours, appearances or attitudes, which is a way of thinking about gender that challenges the dominant narrative that the gender categories of "boy" and "girl" are natural or innate. Throughout her blog, L. called attention to different forms of gender funneling. In one post, for example, she discussed the restrictive and harmful messaging that a book flyer with a "For Girls" section sends to all children, and in particular, to boys if they are interested in a book

from that section (“Limited Options/Gendered Options”, 2009). L.’s term, gender funneling, resonated deeply with some readers of her blog. A reader named Morgan commented, “You express these ideas so beautifully and confidently. It’s an inspiration to me to have more courage in the face of ‘what others think’ ... and I love the concept of ‘gender funneling’” (Morgan, 2008).

Addressing frequently asked questions (FAQs) was another way that bloggers educated others about affirmatively raising gender diverse children. Marlo wrote a formatted FAQ blog post to address concerns about her parenting, answering questions such as “What if this is just a phase and I’m setting her on a path in which she’ll feel stuck?” and “What if she’s just being controlling?” (Marlo Mack, 2013). Similarly, in her post, “The 10 Things People Say to Parents of Trans Kids”, Vanessa used her writing to dispel some of the dangerous myths she had often encountered as the parent of a transgender child (Nichols, 2018, November 4). These included, for example, the assumption that parents make their kid transgender, that being transgender is a form of mental illness, or that transgender children and their parents are ‘sinners’ (Nichols, 2018, November 4, #1, #4, and #8, respectively). Additionally, Vanessa frequently centered her writing around providing clarification on complex topics, such as the differences between sexuality and gender identity (Nichols, 2018, July 31). Reflecting on the importance of raising awareness in advocating for change, she wrote: “We are in desperate need of an education so we can see more allies rising up for this amazing, resilient community” (Nichols, 2018, November 4, Conclusion section, para. 2).

In addressing these FAQs or dispelling commonly-held myths, the blog authors not only corrected misinformation and provided accurate information, but also provided other parents, and any reader who might be confronted with the same types of comments, the necessary words

and wisdom to be able to educate others and to advocate for gender diverse children and their parents. Many readers expressed their gratitude to the writer for addressing such misconceptions, suggesting that educational posts are indeed working to expand people's understanding of gender-related topics. For example, one reader posting under the alias "Time Out and Travels" said they were studying to become a teacher. In reply to Vanessa's post, they commented: "Wow! This is great. So perfectly written. From a strong religious upbringing, I have remained open but struggled to understand. This has been very helpful" (Time Out and Travels, 2018). It is easy to imagine the far-reaching effects that such understanding might have, for example in the lives of the gender diverse children who might find themselves in such a teacher's classroom.

Sharing Resources, Creating Resources. In addition to confronting stereotypes and dispelling myths about gender and parenting a gender diverse child, the authors also responded to the lack of resources available to parents of gender diverse children. The blog authors worked to change the status quo by sharing both material resources (e.g., links to supportive organizations), and immaterial resources (e.g., personal stories of managing typical challenging situations).

On her blog, Sarah shared material sources of knowledge and support in the form of lists of links to helpful organizations (Sarah & Ian Hoffman, n.d., Organizations), as well as a list of age-appropriate reading suggestions for children and for adults (Sarah & Ian Hoffman, n.d., Recommended Reading). Sarah also promoted gender-inclusive companies and products in her blog posts. She often reviewed items such as children's books and clothing, and then hosted giveaways of those items for readers (e.g., Sarah Hoffman, 2010, November 23; Sarah Hoffman, 2011, January 16). In the same vein, L. promoted other blogs devoted to parenting gender diverse children by including a "blogroll" (a list of links to her recommended blogs) in her

website template, so that it is visible at the right-hand side of all of her posts (e.g., “Coming Around”, 2015). Additionally, Sarah and Marlo shared their experiences of attending annual conferences devoted to gender diverse children and those who care for them (e.g., Marlo Mack, 2014, August 7; Sarah Hoffman, 2010, September 7). In so doing, they not only alert readers to the existence of such conferences, but also shared some of the knowledge they gained by attending. Such methods allowed the blog authors to share their knowledge of material resources and other sources of information, with the aim of increasing others' access to this knowledge.

When there seemed to be no readily available resource, blog authors tended to create and share their own. This often occurred when authors wrote about their experiences of navigating personal parenting challenges. In such cases, the authors offered their readers potential solutions or ways to think through different situations as they came up. Sometimes this simply took the form of sharing the joyful and challenging experiences of raising their gender diverse child, as in Vanessa's post “How We Knew It Was Time”, which detailed when and how she came to understand her child's gender identity (Nichols, 2018, May 9). At other times, the parents created and shared material resources that helped them manage difficult circumstances, such as letters they had written to communicate about important issues related to parenting their children. A common theme amongst blog authors was the process of ‘coming out’ to their extended family as affirming of their child's gender diversity. This was a complex task that involved the potential for loss of support from relatives. While describing her experience of this process, Marlo shared a letter that she had sent to her extended family and close friends declaring her unconditional support for her child and inviting her family and friends to do the same (Marlo Mack, 2014, February 1). Additionally, she offered her words to her readers to help them write their own letters: “I know that a lot of parents like me send letters to family and friends. If you are trying to

write such a letter, please feel free to borrow any words from my letter that resonate with you” (Marlo Mack, 2014, February 1, para. 3). Readers seemed to value these types of examples and find them beneficial for navigating similar circumstances. For example, in response to a shared letter that Marlo had written to family and friends announcing her support of her child, a reader posting as “Mara Migraineur” commented, “Perfect timing! We have to write a similar letter – very much drawing a line in the sand – and I have little idea where to start” (Mara Migraineur, 2014).

In addition to familial contexts, the educational environment was often an area where parents felt that they needed to advocate on behalf of their child. For example, Sarah shared a letter that she had written to the parents of her son's classmates when her son started kindergarten, in an attempt to answer questions and open lines of communication (Sarah Hoffman, 2011, August 24). Moreover, she asked readers to share their own letters used to navigate the school system, and with their permission, posted these on her blog to share with other readers, “in the hopes that those of you writing your own letters will find some inspiration” (Sarah Hoffman, 2011, August 27, para. 1). In this series of blog posts, Sarah shared not only her own knowledge and resources, but mined and disseminated the knowledge of her readers, using the blog platform to exponentially multiply access to knowledge and experience. A reader named Jen responded to one of the posted letters by noting the significance and value of sharing such resources and knowledge within the community: “This is fascinating – it's the kind of stuff that hadn't even occurred to me yet, which is why it's so important to share this information with others” (Jen, 2011, August 31).

Modeling and Encouraging Action

In addition to sharing resources, the blog authors also wrote about actions they were taking in their own communities to counter gender injustice. All the authors expressed the importance of raising awareness about the negative impact of rigid gender norms. They also invited their readers to do the same. Sarah, for instance, asked readers of her blog to raise issues related to gender with people in their communities, imploring readers to: “talk about all the different ways there are for kids (and adults) to express their gender. Talk to your kids. Talk to other kids on the playground. Talk to the parents at the park and in your child’s school” (Sarah Hoffman, 2010, December 9, para. 11). She further explained: “I believe in talking to as many people and types of people as I can. The more we talk about kids who are different, the more we make them less different, and the more we keep them safe” (Sarah Hoffman, 2010, December 9, para. 11). Similarly, Vanessa urged her readers to educate themselves in order to challenge transphobia. She advised that her readers: “Call people out on transphobic and homophobic ‘jokes’. Open conversations about trans people, bring some education ... and medical facts to the table. Seek information. Research. Read. Follow people on social media that are influencers in marginalized communities. *Speak up*” (Nichols, 2019).

At times, the authors wrote advocacy letters that directly responded to their child’s lived experiences. For example, the catalyst for Sarah to address the issue of school bullying was her son’s experiences of being bullied. Sarah reached out to her readers, explaining, “This week I wrote a letter to the head of our school, the principals of the lower school and the middle school, and the school counselor, asking them to do more. I encourage you to write your own letter” (Sarah Hoffman, 2010, October 24, para. 3). Sarah also offered suggestions to her readers of useful information to include in a letter to administrators in order to facilitate change, including

research about the effects of childhood bullying, and resources about building an anti-bullying curriculum (Sarah Hoffman, 2010, October 24, paras. 4-17).

At other times, the authors were inspired to write letters due to events that occurred in the political sphere. For example, L. shared about writing a letter to then U.S. President Barack Obama to express her displeasure about the lack of same-sex partner employment benefits, encouraging readers of her blog to follow suit ("Dear President Obama", 2009). In general, readers seemed to resonate with L's actions and at times find inspiration to add their own name to advocacy letters addressed to political leaders (e.g., Cynthia Lindeman, 2009, January 11). Readers also chimed in on conversations by providing ideas and links to resources such as Trans Youth Family Allies (TYFA)¹², an organization that promotes allyship and advocating for trans youth (Ghanima Corrino, 2009, June 28).

In a similar vein, Sarah described feeling compelled to take action because of a conversation with a friend about a restaurant chain that offered their meals with either a toy "for boys" or a toy "for girls". She wrote, "Being the agitator that I am, I emailed [the fast-food chain] to ask what their corporate policy is on asking The Toy Question ... Because how they ask makes all the difference" (Sarah Hoffman, 2010, October 12, para. 5). Sarah then urged her readers to do the same (Sarah Hoffman, 2010, October 12, para. 5). A couple of days later, she reported that the restaurant chain had replied, assuring her that their employees were trained to ask which of the two toys the customer would like, rather than ask if they would like a boy or girl toy (Sarah Hoffman, 2010, October 14, para. 3). Sarah asked them to consider additional training in light of her friend's experience (Sarah Hoffman, 2010, October 14, para. 6). Again, she invited her readers to contact the corporation, and explained, "It's a small act of activism that

¹² <http://www.imatyfa.org/index.html>

has the potential to have a lasting impact on the cultural conversation about gender” (Sarah Hoffman, 2010, October 14, para. 6). She received predominantly positive feedback from her readers regarding this action, for example, a reader named “ECS” commented, “What a great thing to do! Simple, funny, and effective. Good work, Sarah” (ECS, 2010).

For Vanessa, actively supporting LGBTQ+ communities as an ally was important. She described co-piloting a movement to send holiday cards to LGBTQ+ people estranged from their families (Nichols, 2018, December 5). She provided information about how to get involved and encouraged her readers to support members of LGBTQ+ communities (Nichols, 2018, December 5). In a different post, Vanessa detailed her path to becoming an ally to transgender communities, and more generally to all marginalized people. She asked her readers to join her in reflecting on their attitudes and actions in relation to what it means to be an ally to transgender people (Nichols, 2019, January 3). She challenged readers to commit to listening, learning, making mistakes, and doing better, and counselled: “As allies, we will screw up. I certainly have {even recently} and I will again. But we have to be committed to learning. Every fucking day” (Nichols, 2019, January 3, para. 36). She urged readers to think about holding back their defensive responses, and instead to ask themselves, “What can I do to help make a difference?” (Nichols, 2019, January 3, paras. 34-35).

Creating Community

One unique aspect of blogging is the interaction that can occur between blog authors and their readership, as well as interaction between the readers themselves, allowing for the development of online connection and relationship. Readers who commented on the blogs appeared largely to occupy one of the following three categories: a) allies (predominantly parents of gender diverse children); b) youth and adults identifying across the trans spectrum (most often

as transgender, non-binary, or gender non-conforming); and c) cis and straight-identified people learning about gender. For commenters who were parents, allies, and members of the trans community, the online community created through the blogs seemed to reduce isolation, while for those interested in learning more about gender, the blogs seemed to raise awareness and offer the opportunity for a change in perspective.

Reducing Isolation. A common difficulty cited by parents raising a gender diverse child is feeling isolated and alone (Menvielle & Tuerk, 2002). For some authors, blogging was a way to decrease feelings of isolation. Simultaneously, the authors' personal stories about raising their gender diverse child seemed to help readers feel not quite as alone. Vanessa expressed gratitude for the stories of parents raising gender diverse children who came before her, as well as a desire to help future parents, writing: "Ultimately, I'm hoping to help others, as others have helped me, because I know I so appreciate those who have told their story" (Nichols, 2018, May 9, para. 6). Earlier in the same post, she asks, "Because, what if others hadn't shared? Where would we be in this journey?" (Nichols, 2018, May 9, para. 4). Relatedly, a sentiment of gratitude was often echoed in reader responses. A reader named Jenn commented on a post that L. had written about her child's gender identity, saying: "Hi, I am new to your blog, relatively new to this 'gender identification' world, and am finding immense comfort in that I am not the only one walking my path" (Jenn, 2011, February 6).

In addition to sharing challenging aspects of their parenting journeys, the authors also connected with their online communities by initiating conversations about joyful events and everyday experiences. In a Halloween-themed blog post, Sarah started a conversation among her readers by asking, "What were you and your family members for Halloween? Did anyone *not* get to be what they wanted...and why? Did anyone's choices surprise you?" (Sarah Hoffman, 2010,

October 31). In a similar vein, L. discussed the types of toys that her son gravitates towards and expressed feeling intrigued whenever her “pink boy” chooses a toy traditionally associated with boys (“Mechanically-inclined”, 2009). L. encouraged connection and sharing amongst the readers of her blog by writing, “Having only one kiddo, I don’t have a good point of comparison ... For those ... who have pink boys, what are your boys interested in? ... I’d love to hear how this plays out for others” (“Mechanically-inclined”, 2009). Each of the above-mentioned posts resulted in numerous readers commenting and sharing their own experiences, thus generating the co-creation of blog content by both author and commenters and enriching the conversation with multiple perspectives.

Sharing Vulnerability and Validation. While blog authors may present a relatively curated version of themselves, their blog posts about their parenting experiences became a space where vulnerability and validation could exist in community. By openly sharing not only their parenting successes but their perceived fumbles, the blog authors seemed to invite readers to respond in kind. For example, Vanessa exposed the challenges she faced and the mistakes she made as she grew into being the supportive mother of a transgender boy (Nichols, 2019, February 15). Her honest writing touched a reader named Roger Yeager, who commented: “I’m so proud of your vulnerability. You give me the confidence to be myself” (Roger Yeager, 2019). Similarly, in a post titled “Confessions”, L. discussed the challenges and heartbreak that she was experiencing while trying to understand and advocate for her son as he grew older (“Confessions, part 3”, 2013, May 15). AndyLC responded on L.’s post, sharing some of their own gender story, and offering L. words of support: “Whatever in the world happens, it isn’t your doing, positive or negative. You’ve done your job as a parent. Your kid CLEARLY knows you are there for them and you support them. Keep doing that” (AndyLC, 2013). To this

comment, L. replied: "Thanks for this thoughtful response. Great to hear your own experiences and really appreciate your acknowledgement!" (labelsareforjars, 2013). This exchange between blog author and reader/commenter illustrates an example of the mutual support that can be offered in online communities. L. shared her feelings of vulnerability about an aspect of parenting, and then appreciated being seen and encouraged by one of her readers. In general, the authors received quite a lot of validation from trans youth and adults, who often expressed the wish that they had had a parent as supportive as the author (e.g., Phlanmichelle, 2018, November 5).

Changing Minds. Not all of the readers' comments and responses were friendly and supportive in nature. As Vanessa reflected, "because I'm a public advocate for trans rights, ... I field a ton of hatred and tongue lashings via every virtual media outlet possible. Keyboard warriors unite!" (Nichols, 2018, November 4, para. 9). Bloggers received messages expressing hate, hostility, contempt, and vitriol. For instance, on a post written by Marlo titled, "Mama, Ella Has a Penis!" (Marlo Mack, 2014, January 17), which discussed how to talk to young children about gender identity, a reader named Taryn commented "'Ella' is a boy, hence the penis! Not a girl! SOMEONE should trace your IP and turn you in for child abuse ya sick freak" (Taryn, 2014). In a blog post called "On Anger" (Sarah Hoffman, 2009, September 30), Sarah relayed the words of a reader who had written her in response to a previous blog post about the bullying her child was experiencing at school. Referring to the reader as "Angry Man", Sarah quoted his message as follows, "You are encouraging this behavior of his, and have likely done irreparable harm to his psychological state. It's disgusting that they've allowed this child to remain in your care. He'll never get a fair chance at life" (Sarah Hoffman, 2009, September 30, paras. 1-2). Sarah expressed that while she doesn't enjoy being the target of nasty comments, she is also

inspired by them, as she interprets the anger as a sign that things are changing (Sarah Hoffman, 2009, September 30, para. 3). Moreover, she reflected that overt expressions of anger offer her opportunities to directly confront discrimination: "This anger will get louder as we get more vocal about the rights of boys who are different. That's a good thing—it brings the hatred out in the open, where we can ... address it" (Sarah Hoffman, 2009, September 30, para. 4). Several years later, Sarah described participating in an interview and, in response, receiving and addressing many angry comments (Sarah Hoffman, 2011, November 9). Many of her readers, she wrote, commented in her defense, particularly to educate an anonymous commenter who had judged Sarah's parenting and blamed Sarah for her son being bullied by other children (Sarah Hoffman, 2011, November 9, para. 4). A few days after this exchange, Sarah posted that the anonymous commenter had offered the following apology: "I was wrong and quick to judge. I still maintain a couple of my feelings but I spoke with a couple people after writing that and I realized how incomplete my understanding of this situation was. So, I apologize" (Sarah Hoffman, 2011, November 9, para. 6). Although it is unclear in this case exactly what changed the commenter's mind, it is clear that Sarah's writing about her experience was what provided the opportunity for a transformation of views on gender and parenting. This kind of transformation of perspective seems to be what many of the authors aimed for with their writing. As Sarah put it, "I just saw a mind open, and it was beautiful" (Sarah Hoffman, 2011, November 9, para. 1).

Regardless of the negative feedback they encountered as a response to blogging about supporting their gender diverse children, the authors felt compelled to continue writing. Some felt that they had no choice but to do this advocacy work, resonating with Manning's (2017) notion of attached advocacy. Sarah, for example, described feeling as though the

transformational work she performed by writing and speaking about raising her gender non-conforming son had 'chosen' her, rather than the other way around. She explained, "I never imagined that the advocacy work I'd long participated in other forms would someday look like this—but it turns out that we don't always get to choose the shape our work takes" (Sarah Hoffman, 2011, July 8, para. 2). Likewise, Vanessa's writing about advocating for trans rights often included a sense of urgency and the sense of having no choice but to engage in activism. In her words, "This is my child. This is my whole world whose life is being threatened. This feels like the fight of my life" (Nichols, 2018, October 30, para. 28).

Discussion

Consistent with what has been reported in the literature, the parents studied described feeling alone in their task of raising a gender diverse child (Menvielle & Tuerk, 2002; Wren, 2002). Due to the lack of institutional support for individuals who defy gender norms and the systemic violence that parents of gender diverse children encounter (Pullen Sansfaçon et al., 2015; Riley et al., 2013), the parents in this study necessarily had to find ways to protect and champion their child, and thus, performed acts of advocacy and activism. This is echoed in the experiences of other parents of gender diverse children, found in the research literature (Brill & Pepper, 2008; Meadow, 2018; Pullen Sansfaçon et al., 2015). Raising a gender diverse child profoundly changed these parents' understanding of gender, particularly in respect to the oppressive nature of rigid gender binary enforcement, and as a result, the parents were transformed into advocates for their child and activists for change. One of the unique ways that parents in this study performed this work was through blogging about their experiences of supportively raising their gender diverse child.

Mediated Kinship

One pathway to understanding the experiences of parents who support their gender diverse children can be found in the scholarship on disability. In their research on parenting children who have a disability, anthropologists Rapp and Ginsburg (2001) coined the term mediated kinship. Ginsburg (2012) defines mediated kinship as the experience of publicly sharing one's intimate experience, resulting in connecting with others of similar experience. Due to its broad reach, digital media often serves as the site for this type of public intimacy and connection. Moreover, publicly sharing an intimate portrait of what it means to inclusively and lovingly parent a child with a difference (Ginsburg's writing focuses on children with disabilities) offers a "critique of normative American family life" (Ginsburg, 2012, p. 108). Rapp and Ginsburg (2001) argue that to connect with others with similar experiences creates the possibility of expanding a "social fund of knowledge", which is facilitated through the broad reach of digital media (p. 550). In addition, digital connection provides a much-needed sense of kinship through shared experiences and understanding. Thus, mediated kinship has implications for expanding individuals' understanding of themselves and for transforming the social and cultural landscape (Ginsburg, 2012; Rapp & Ginsburg, 2001). The concept of mediated kinship is useful in illuminating the processes and outcomes of blogging by parents affirmatively raising their gender diverse child.

Critique of Normative Life

The current narrative regarding gender diverse children and their caregivers can be gleaned through the types of societal and institutional support available to these families. That is, the lack of inclusion and prioritization of these families in the realms of education as well as physical and mental healthcare reflects the dominant sociocultural narrative that gender diverse children do not, or should not, exist. While the idea that it is not natural for gender identities and

expressions to fall outside the binary has recently been dispelled in the medical and psychological domains, public perception lags behind this perspective shift, and discrimination and violence towards gender diverse individuals persists (D'Augelli et al., 2006; Stotzer, 2009).

The blog authors reject these norms and document a different path: acceptance, support, and celebration of their child's gender identities and expressions. The authors present an alternative to prevailing transphobic societal currents through sharing their experiences of supportively raising a transgender or gender expansive child. Their personal stories demonstrate multiple ways that parents can affirm their gender diverse children, even when public support and institutional resources are scarce. The blogs document how parents embraced their child's difference with love and care—in effect, offering what Rapp and Ginsburg (2001) describe as a critique of “normative life” (p. 108).

The act of blogging itself offers a way to fight the invisibility of gender diverse children and their families in society. Blogging provides a place where authors can directly communicate with the public without their perspectives being filtered or diluted. This platform also allows the writers a means of disseminating knowledge and correcting misconceptions, providing space to deconstruct the narratives around gender through exposing the sociocultural mores that police the gender of all people and especially children. The blog authors used their personal stories to provide examples of affirmatively raising gender diverse children, even within a system that devalues and stigmatizes these children. In effect, the authors challenge their readers to think differently about how the binary gender system operates in everyday life, while providing a model of inclusive and affirmative parenting.

Kinship

Within the literature on parents raising gender diverse children, there is a consistent emphasis on the notion that parents feel isolated and alone (Menvielle & Tuerk, 2002; Wren, 2002). By revealing intimate aspects of their lives through blogging, the authors help lift the barriers of societal invisibility and isolation that prevent gender diverse children and their families from accessing support and community. The very act of blogging helps to shatter the myth that there are few parents on similar journeys, thus decreasing the sense of isolation for both blog authors and their readers.

Through publicly showcasing the joys and sorrows of their experience of raising their child, the authors also expose moments of strength and vulnerability. Documenting their lives in intimate detail in blog format invited other readers to comment and share their own opinions and experiences, thus providing space for many experiences, perspectives, and emotions. Facilitating interaction with readers and commenters on their blogs, the authors created a community where successes were celebrated and where members were buoyed by supportive comments when they struggled or felt like they had erred. Although the comments posted on the blog were largely positive, authors received negative comments as well. Nonetheless, the community came together to attend to the negative commentaries, bolstering the sense of online kinship.

Social Fund of Knowledge

The extant literature has reported that many parents of gender diverse children have difficulty accessing guidance on how to best raise their child (Pullen Sansfaçon et al., 2015; Riley et al., 2013). The parents in the present study expressed similar sentiments about being in uncharted waters when it came to knowing how to best raise their gender diverse child. The authors each had varying degrees of knowledge about different aspects of raising a gender diverse child when they began to blog about the experience. Some were just beginning to attend

to and understand their child's gender journey, while others seemed to be more experienced. Regardless, in choosing to write about their experiences, the blog authors made a choice to share their knowledge with online readers. The authors also shared their questions and encouraged their readers to weigh in with their own knowledge and experiences.

One strategy that the authors used to address the paucity of information about parenting gender diverse children was to promote existing resources to their readers. By sharing information about books, articles, research, and conferences devoted to gender diverse children, they affirmed that gender diverse children and their families exist, thrive, and deserve care. Beyond promoting resources, the authors also provided accurate information about gender diverse children and gave personal accounts of raising and affirming their gender diverse child. Moreover, the blogs provided readers with examples of how the authors navigated some of the challenging aspects of raising a gender diverse child, through personal stories and concrete tools they provided for readers (e.g., letter templates). In this way, the bloggers provided their readers with much-needed examples for navigating potentially difficult situations, such as coming out to family members or speaking with school authorities.

As well as sharing their accumulated knowledge and experiences via their blogs, the authors used the online platform to solicit and highlight knowledge from their readers. In this way, the fund of knowledge that the authors offered expanded to include the wisdom of their entire blog community. As blog authors and commenters each contributed their experiences and knowledge, they co-created a social fund of knowledge benefiting the entire online blog community. In effect, through creating a community where knowledge is freely shared amongst community members, they addressed the lack of expertise and concern in public and institutional spheres. The blog community became a place where members can both offer and receive

knowledge from others in the community, and the blog itself holds this social fund of knowledge.

Summary and Conclusions

This examination of the role of blogging for parents affirmatively raising their gender diverse child revealed that the common motive to write a blog was to create change at the societal level. Parents felt compelled to advocate for their gender diverse child as well as to advance broader sociocultural change. The parents whose blogs were analyzed in this study chose to act by creating a blog through which they shared their intimate parenting stories online. Through interactions with readers, the authors created a community where readers also supported the blog's creation and maintenance. Analysis revealed that the blogs contributed to effecting change on two levels: expanding individuals' understandings of themselves and their world; and transforming the social and cultural landscape with regards to gender. This change was produced via the blog platform through radical acts of visibility, community building, and knowledge diffusion by the blog community.

Through creating this sense of mediated kinship, the blogs studied became spaces where advocacy, activism, and transformative gender justice could occur. Although TGJ is generally understood to promote larger-scale systemic change, the blogs can be seen as places where the underlying principles of TGJ operate. The blogs work toward filling in the gaps of visibility, knowledge, and care that should be available through institutional and public supports for families with gender diverse children. Thus, in a sense, the blogs establish an alternative to the neo-liberal policies and narratives that create and maintain the oppression associated with upholding a rigid binary gender system. The notion of participatory parity is also manifested through the collaborative contributions of blog authors and their readers to the blog's creation.

Strengths and Limitations

This study has limitations that must be considered when interpreting the results. The blog authors represent a homogenous sample of a modest size. Though it could not be verified, all of the authors appeared to identify as white, financially stable, able-bodied, cis-gender women. As previously mentioned in this paper, the performance of advocacy and activist work such as blogging is more accessible to those who have the time, energy, and finances for this work (Manning, 2017). It is also more accessible to those whose safety will not be further jeopardized due to existing oppressive structures (Travers, 2019). Therefore, to build on this study, future research should explore the intersections of race, class, and ability and how these factors enable or pose barriers to advocacy and activism from diverse voices, in order to further build towards an inclusive and egalitarian community and support system for all gender diverse children and their families.

This study has a number of strengths, including the longitudinal and naturalistic characteristic of its data. That is, the texts studied were authored over a period of 4 years and represent information that is salient to the blog authors, rather than being guided by the researcher's process. Moreover, using online texts in the public domain allowed the researchers to access a hard-to-reach population and allowed the study of experience without using intrusive methods. Notably, as the first study of the function of blogging in the lives of parents affirmatively raising gender diverse children, this study represents findings unique to this population. It revealed various rationales for blogging, and highlighted the multitude of ways that parents used blogs to promote change in the world.

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Chapter 6: General Discussion and Conclusions

Summary of Main Findings

This dissertation addressed two research questions: (1) What are the experiences of parents who are affirmatively raising a gender diverse child? and (2) What is the function of blogging for parents who blog about supportively raising a gender expansive child? Data for the studies were sourced from four multi-year blogs in the public domain, each written by a parent who was supportive of their pre-adolescent child's gender diversity. Both studies applied a feminist constructivist epistemological stance and a narrative approach to inquiry. Data were analyzed using a narrative-informed thematic analysis—a process of identifying, interpreting, and recording patterns within data (Braun & Clarke, 2006), while attending to the commonplaces of narrative inquiry: temporality, sociality, and spatiality (Clandinin & Rosiek, 2007). The first study employed a discourse analysis to contextualize and critically interpret its results, situating the experiences of parents in relation to currently accepted social norms and beliefs about parenting and gender. The results of the second study were interpreted through the frames of transformative gender justice and mediated kinship in order to consider the sociopolitical realities of the participants in relation to the function of blogging for parents.

Research Question 1: What are the experiences of parents who are affirmatively raising a gender diverse child?

This study extended and largely confirmed previous findings in the existing literature on the experiences of parents supportively raising a gender diverse child. Analysis of the blogs generated the following major themes: working through and witnessing genderism; letting go; coming out; seeking knowledge; creating community; and managing unanticipated demands. These themes highlight the intrapersonal and interpersonal processes that parents experience

over time as they raise their transgender or gender diverse child. The design of this study allowed for a longitudinal perspective of the processes experienced by the parents, aiding deconstruction of the idea that these processes are terminal in nature. Situating these themes within the larger context of discourses on parenting and gender afforded a new understanding of the experience of raising a gender diverse child. Parents worked through the insidious nature and effects of genderism and found ways to provide for their child in a world that offers little in the way of societal and institutional support. The findings highlight the parents' dual roles of leader and follower experienced by affirming parents of gender diverse children.

Research Question 2: What is the function of blogging for parents who blog about supportively raising a gender expansive child?

Data analysis revealed that a shared motivation for blogging among the parents studied was the desire to create change. The parents felt compelled to advocate for their gender diverse child and to advance broader sociocultural change. Through blogging, they promoted change by confronting stereotypes and dispelling myths about gender diversity, and by sharing and creating resources for other parents of gender diverse children. The blog authors modelled advocacy and activism and also encouraged their readers to take action. Lastly, the parents created an online community through the action of blogging. Through sharing intimate parenting experiences and interacting with readers, their blogs helped to reduce their isolation and to change presumptions about gender diverse children and those who care for them. This change was produced via the blog platform through radical acts of visibility and community building.

The function of blogging for these parents is amenable to the notion of mediated kinship. That is, the blogs became spaces where advocacy and activism were practiced. Moreover, the blogs were spaces where the underlying principles of transformative justice operated. The blogs

have worked toward filling the gaps of visibility, knowledge, and care that should be available through institutional and public supports for families with gender diverse children. Thus, in a sense, the blogs establish an alternative to the neo-liberal environments that create and maintain the oppression associated with upholding a rigid binary gender system.

Strengths and Unique Contributions of the Research

A significant body of research has been devoted to the experiences of gender diverse children and youth, but relatively little attention has been paid to the people who raise them, despite the well-documented fact that parental support may be the strongest protective factor against negative mental health outcomes for gender diverse individuals (Katz-Wise et al., 2018; Olson et al., 2016; Ryan et al., 2010, Travers et al., 2012). The present research aims to contribute to a growing body of new literature on parents who affirm their child's gender diversity.

The study themes outlined in the first manuscript of this dissertation reinforce the findings of the extant literature on the experiences of parents affirmatively raising a gender diverse child. Application of discourse analysis to the generated themes highlighted dominant narratives about parenting and gender and offered a new understanding of how parents learn to navigate their contexts while caring for their gender diverse child. The second manuscript, to our knowledge, is the first study to illuminate the function of blogging for parents who write about supportively raising their gender diverse child. The results reveal the ingenuity of parents who perform advocacy and activism through blogging. Through the process of writing to create change, allowing comments from readers and responding to them, these blog authors have built a community of readers who, together, meet each other's needs by sharing stories, reducing

isolation, and sharing resources. Thus, this study contributes to understanding the role that blogging can play for parents supporting a gender diverse child.

In addition to these findings, the study offers a number of methodological contributions. To our knowledge, this is the first study of its kind to use multiple blogs as the sole data source, which provided several methodological benefits. First, the blogs chosen for the study provided a substantial number of posts written over the course of four or more years, which allowed for an exploration of experiences over time. Moreover, there is typically little delay between bloggers having an experience and writing about that experience (Toms & Duff, 2002), which results in real-time reflections and reactions, rather than data that is retrospective in nature (Verbrugge, 1980). Thus, the choice of multiple blogs as the sole data source allowed for an exploration of experience, both as it happened and over time. Furthermore, the data were unsolicited and thus uninfluenced by researcher-led inquiry, emphasizing the information that the parents themselves deemed salient. The fact that these parents' experiences, as reported in their blogs, echoed much of what was found in the extant literature about parenting gender diverse children suggests that blogs can be a reliable source of data. Using blogs as data is an under-utilized approach to research, especially within the sphere of counselling psychology. Thus, this approach represents a unique contribution and a revolutionary approach to research in this field.

Implications for Practice

Given the enormous potential for individuals to express a variety of gender identities, it is likely that mental health practitioners¹³ will encounter gender diverse individuals and/or their families in a practice setting, whether or not the clients are seeking care specifically related to gender issues. Many mental health practitioners have no training in the area of sex and gender,

¹³ For the purpose of this discussion, the term mental health practitioner is used to refer to counselling psychologists, psychotherapists, and school psychologists.

thus may be ill-equipped to work with gender diverse individuals (Lev, 2004). Many trans individuals have received subpar or harmful services from psychologists and other health practitioners without such training (Benson, 2013; Grant et al., 2011; Grossman & D'Augelli, 2006). Evidence suggests that when mental health and other service providers send the message that gender expression must conform to traditional gender roles congruent with sex assigned at birth, gender diverse children are negatively impacted (Hill et al., 2010). Practitioners thus do clients a disservice by putting limits on their client's self-determined expressions of gender identity.

It is therefore imperative that mental health practitioners increase their competence for working with gender diverse individuals, and adopt a non-pathologizing, trans-affirmative stance. As previously discussed in this dissertation, it is clear that the pervasiveness of genderism influences mental health service providers and their ability to provide competent care to gender diverse individuals. In an attempt to remedy the limitations of working from a genderist positionality, mental health practitioners must examine their own assumptions about gender and explore their gender related biases. This includes working to understand the personal and broader ramifications of living and working in a society that reinforces genderist ideals through the policing of gender identities and expressions. Certainly, practitioners must work through their own genderist system of beliefs prior to being able to work with gender diverse individuals and their families.

A crucial role of the mental health practitioner working with families with gender diverse children is to assist parents in supporting their child's development. Given the current transphobic climate (e.g., Pyne, et al., 2015; Taylor & Peter, 2011) as well as the lack of resources available to parents who affirm their child's gender diversity (e.g., Pullen Sansfaçon et

al, 2015), it is understandable that parents may seek support on this journey. The findings of the present research provide a more nuanced understanding of the iterative processes that parents may experience when parenting a gender diverse child, and offer insight to mental health practitioners working with such parents. Moreover, practitioners can help parents to situate their experiences of trying to be the best parent for their child within the competing hegemonic discourses around parenting and gender.

It is likely that parents of gender diverse children will engage in a continuous process of examining their own deeply held beliefs about gender, which are likely to have been informed by predominant genderist doctrine. Mental health practitioners can help parents understand that they can affirm their child's gender identities and expressions while also continuing to work through their own assumptions and convictions about gender. Moreover, parents may benefit from the understanding that this process is iterative in nature, and may need to be explored time and time again. Because the idea persists that a healthy gender identity is located in the achievement of exclusive masculinity or femininity, a clinically valuable endpoint in itself would be to assert the understanding that gender is best conceived of as a spectrum of a multitude of gender identities and infinite possibilities for expression.

Additionally, mental health practitioners should be prepared to acknowledge the external pressures and emotional demands that some parents may experience, including being scrutinized and blamed for their parenting, feeling uncertain about their parenting, and relatedly, experiencing feelings of worry and helplessness. Again, it may help parents better understand their experiences to situate them in the context of a lack of societal recognition and support for families like theirs, as well as acknowledging the dearth of institutional knowledge. Not only should practitioners working with parents of gender diverse children acknowledge the scarcity of

resources, but they should be able to point parents towards existing available resources. Blogs written by parents affirmatively raising a gender diverse child are one source of knowledge for both mental health practitioners and parents. Becoming a part of an online community situated around a blog may help to reduce parents' isolation and increase their access to affirming knowledge and resources.

Mental health practitioners working with gender diverse children and youth may find it useful to employ a holistic systems approach. Indeed, Hill and Menvielle (2009) encourage practitioners to consider gender non-conforming youth as one part of a socio-psychological dynamic that includes parents, siblings, grandparents, friends, and teachers, as this whole system is integral to the child's healthy adaptation. Rather than requiring the child to adjust their gender identity or expression, there is often a need to adjust the child's environment, including family, school, and community. In addition to working therapeutically with gender diverse children, practitioners may also be called upon to provide psychoeducation and coaching to parents, and to advocate on behalf of gender diverse children and their families in the broader community. Hence, there is a need for mental health practitioners to increase their competence in advocating for gender diverse children, and assisting families in affirming their child's gender expressions and identities (Pyne, 2012).

Finally, it may be helpful to parents for mental health practitioners to address the prevailing narrative that parents know best. While this adage makes sense in many areas of parenting, when it comes to a child's developing gender identities and expression, parents may need to adjust their expectations of themselves. Letting go of the idea that they should know what is best for their child in this realm may help to reframe their parenting responsibilities as

well as providing a means for parent-child connection. While following their child's lead with regards to gender may be difficult for parents, ultimately it can be a liberating experience.

Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

Notwithstanding the strengths and important contributions of this research study, it had certain limitations, which should be considered when interpreting the results. First, the results are limited in scope, given the modest homogeneous sample of parents. The authors of the blogs, aside from supporting their gender diverse child, seemed to also share other identity characteristics, some of which are unverifiable. For instance, they all appeared to be white, somewhat financially stable, able-bodied, cisgender women. As Manning (2017) aptly observed, the performance of advocacy and activist work is more accessible to those who have the privilege of extra time, energy, and financial resources. Likewise, Travers (2019) notes that this type of labour is more accessible to those whose safety will not be further jeopardized due to existing oppressive structures. Thus, it is likely that existing systems of privilege and oppression including racism, classism, ablism, and genderism affect access to the resources required to create and maintain a blog. This represents a sampling bias within this study. Moreover, as all of the parents in this study affirmed their child's gender identities and expressions, the findings and recommendations may not be transferable to all parents of gender diverse children, some of whom may not be affirming of their child's gender identities and/or expressions. The presumed shared characteristics of the authors of the blogs studied may have resulted in a limited perspective, which, therefore, cannot be generalized to other parents of gender diverse children. Additionally, the parents in this study had access to technology, and seemed to possess a certain amount of internet communication skills that provided them with the opportunity to write about their experiences and receive feedback from a large online audience, many of whom were

unknown to the blog authors. Parents without access to technology, or online presence, may seek knowledge and support in different ways, such as attending small, in-person parenting groups. These differences in access to technology and to different types of support and feedback further illuminate the limits of generalizability of this study.

Use of blogs as the sole data source, while offering considerable procedural benefit, also presented certain methodological limitations. First and foremost, use of blog posts as data requires careful consideration of whether a blog should be treated as a cultural artefact, and its author a cognizant producer of cultural content, or if such online content should be approached using a human subject research model. This classification informs decisions about the treatment of authors of online texts, as well as the research process. In the present research, the decision to employ a cultural artefact model (rather than a human subject model) prohibited any contact with the blog authors, and thus no follow-up interviews were conducted to obtain a more nuanced understanding of the authors' experiences.

Despite its limitations, this research provides insight for parents and psychologists about the experiences of parents who blog about affirmatively raising a gender diverse child. While the empirical literature in this area is growing, its breadth and scope remain limited. As such, more research is needed to provide a more complete understanding of the experiences of families with gender diverse children. Specifically, additional research is needed to understand how to facilitate health and wellness for families with gender diverse children. It is clear that such parents are currently faced with a scarcity of resources and institutional supports. Research on the sociocultural conditions that promote gender inequality and prevent gender diverse children and their families from accessing and participating in institutions is crucial. For instance, intervention research in academic settings is required to understand how schools can make the

necessary adjustments to provide a supportive environment for gender diverse children. Finally, future research should explore the intersections of race, class, and ability and how they influence parenting a gender diverse child, as sociocultural disparity may pose barriers to parents who wish to engage in advocacy and activism. Embracing and amplifying diverse voices in future research will be essential to building an inclusive and egalitarian community that adequately supports children of all genders and their families.

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Appendix A

Definition of Terms¹⁴

AFAB: (pronounced ā-fab) An acronym signifying Assigned Female at Birth. AFAB individuals may identify as female some of the time, all of the time, or not at all. AFAB can be a useful term to use when referring to bodies without connection to womanhood or femaleness.

AMAB: (pronounced ā-mab) An acronym signifying Assigned Male at Birth. AMAB individuals may identify as male some of the time, all of the time, or not at all.. AMAB can be a useful term to use when referring to bodies without connection to manhood or maleness.

Assigned Sex: The sex category (usually male or female) given to new born child based on their visible sex organs, including genitalia and/or other physical attributes.

Cisgender: (pronounced sis-gender): A word used to refer to someone whose gender identity is congruent with the one associated with their assigned sex.

Cis-sexism: A system of oppression that includes prejudice, stereotyping, and/or discrimination on the basis of sex, specifically towards transgender and gender-expansive individuals.

Gender Fluid: A word used to refer to someone who does not consistently adhere to one fixed gender identity and/or gender expression.

Genderism: A system of culturally-informed beliefs that reinforces the idea that gender is binary (boy/girl, man/woman) and determined by binary biological sex characteristics (male/female; Hill & Willoughby, 2005).

Gender Nonconforming (GNC): A word used to refer to someone whose gender identity, gender expression and/or gender roles are different from what is expected of them in a

¹⁴ Definitions of terms have been adapted from the PFLAG (<https://pflag.org/glossary>), an organization for LGBTQ+ people, and their parents and families, and allies, unless otherwise indicated.

given culture. GNC is sometimes used as an umbrella term for nonbinary genders. Some people feel that this term is offensive, as it implies that there is a gender norm that is being transgressed, so they may use other terms including gender expansive, differently gendered, gender creative, gender variant, genderqueer, nonbinary, genderfluid, gender neutral, or gender diverse.

Genderqueer: A term that is used to refer to individuals who blur preconceived boundaries of gender in relation to the gender binary. They may also reject gender stereotypes based on their assigned sex. At times, genderqueer is used as an umbrella term, similar to the way that the term queer is used, but only refers to gender.

Intersex: A word used to refer to people who do not fit the typical medical definition, or who fall between the medically expected definition, of male and female.

LGBTQ+: An acronym that commonly refers to the collective group of people who identify as Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, or Queer. The “+” represents those who belong to the community, but for whom the terms lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender or queer do not accurately represent their identity.

Nonbinary: An umbrella term that refers to individuals who do not subscribe to the gender binary, and or whose gender identities are outside of the gender binary. Non binary can be abbreviated to enby (but should not be shortened to NB, as historically, this term has signified non-Black).

Queer: A word that has been reclaimed and used by some LGBTQ+ individuals to describe themselves and/or their communities of sexual and gender identities that fall outside of heterosexual and cisgender norms. Due to its history and varied meanings, this word is best used when self-identifying or quoting someone who self-identifies as queer.

Transfeminine: A word that refers to an AMAB person whose gender identity is closer to femininity than masculinity, but who is not a binary woman. This term is often abbreviated to transfem or transfemme.

Transgender: A word used to refer to someone whose gender identity does not necessarily match their assigned sex. People who identify as transgender may or may not alter their bodies to match their gender identity. Transgender is also used as an umbrella term to refer collectively to people whose gender expression and/or gender roles are different from what is expected of them in a given culture. The term transgender is frequently abbreviated to trans, which may be considered more inclusive because it can include transgender, transsexual, transmasculine, transfeminine, as well as people who simply use the word trans.

Transmasculine: A word that refers to an AFAB person whose gender identity is closer to masculinity than femininity but who is not a binary man. This term is frequently abbreviated to transmasc.

Transphobia: Negative attitudes, feelings, hatred, or aversion to transgender and gender-expansive people and communities that is frequently exhibited in the form of prejudice and bias. Transphobia is often based on stereotypes and/or misconceptions regarding transgender people that are used to justify discrimination and violence towards people who identify as transgender, or who are perceived to be transgender.

Transition: A social, legal, and/or medical process that a person may undertake to affirm one's gender identity, which can, but does not always include actions such as: changing names and pronouns, modifying identification documents, taking hormones, and having surgeries. Individuals may choose not to, or may be unable to engage in transition-related actions for reasons both in and outside of their control. The legitimacy of someone's gender identity does

not depend on any social, legal, and/or medical transition; self-identification itself is what validates a person's gender identity.

Appendix B**Research Ethics Board Communication**

From: Laura Copeland
Sent: November-05-18 11:51 AM
To: Lynda McNeil <lynda.mcneil@mcgill.ca>
Cc: Ada Sinacore, Dr. <ada.sinacore@mcgill.ca>

Subject: Ethics questions about data in the public domain

Hi Lynda,

I have changed my doctoral dissertation project, and I wanted to contact you to ensure that I am clear about the ethical considerations involved in the new project.

The new project is a thematic analysis of blogs that are found on the internet in the public domain. There is open access to these blogs, and they can be found by using common search terms in google. Reviewing the literature, I have found similar studies, that include analyses of data from blogs that are in the public domain, have not been subject to review by ethics boards, as the data used is accessible by the general public.

Could you let me know if there are any ethical considerations related to using data that is in the public domain, like perhaps keeping the names of the blogs, and authors of the blogs confidential.

Many thanks,

Laura Copeland

Laura Copeland M.A., M.Sc. Ph.D. Candidate
Counselling Psychology
Social Justice and Diversity Lab McGill University

RE: Ethics questions about data in the public domain

Lynda McNeil <lynda.mcneil@mcgill.ca>

Mon 12/11/2018 15:52

To: Laura Copeland <laura.copeland@mail.mcgill.ca> Cc: Ada Sinacore, Dr. <ada.sinacore@mcgill.ca>

Hello Laura,

If it's a public blog as you describe, then you do not need ethics review. However, it is your responsibility to be aware of copyright statements.

Lynda

Lynda McNeil

Associate Director, Research Ethics Directrice associée, Éthique de la recherche

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