

## *Cisnormative Empathy: A Critical Examination of Love, Support, and Compassion for Transgender People by their Loved Ones\**

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Supportive family members appear to be an important source of compassion and allyship for their transgender loved ones, and yet there is little research on the family members themselves. With growing recognition, researchers are increasingly focusing on these perspectives, yet there remains a dearth of literature that incorporates the perspectives of people with transgender parents. In this paper, I use 20 in-depth, semi-structured interviews to assess the empathetic self-constructions of participants as they describe their love and support for their transgender parent, while examining potential dangers of support that is underpinned by traditional norms related to gender, sexuality, and family. I introduce *cisnormative empathy* to identify this phenomenon, acknowledging the importance of empathy as a precursor to support and acceptance, while exploring how empathetic self-constructions combined with actions underpinned by cisnormativity may be counterproductive to the needs of transgender loved ones and the transgender community as a whole. I suggest that additional supports for transgender people's loved ones are needed to help explore complicated emotions while also challenging cisnormative ideologies.

### **Introduction**

In order to further knowledge about transgender<sup>1</sup> people's families, it is important to understand how cisnormativity, or a social order built on the expectation that individuals' gender identities match the sex they are assigned at birth, is produced, maintained, and reproduced (Schilt and Lagos, 2017). The assumption that all people are and should be cisgender<sup>2</sup> (Bauer et al. 2009; Serano 2016) requires investigation at all levels of society, from institutional to interactional. Supportive family members appear to be an important source of support and allyship for their trans loved ones (Pyne 2012; Veldorale-Griffin 2014), and yet, there is little research that examines the support and empathy from the perspective of the family members themselves. Within the family, there is little current literature that examines how children of transitioning<sup>3</sup> parents navigate and negotiate cisnormativity. While children who were born into trans families may have learned to both reproduce and challenge cisnormativity

their whole lives, children who have a transitioning parent find cisnormativity disrupted and newly challenged.

It may be said that all members of a family with a transitioning person may be transitioning together (Pfeffer 2017; Tabor 2018), though little research examines these navigational processes from the perspective of people with trans parents. The present study examines adolescents' and young adults' past and current experiences of navigation and negotiation with their parents, while one parent goes through gender transition. As participants often envision themselves as becoming more compassionate and empathetic through their experience of their parent's transition, I explore how this self-construction is also shaped by broader ideologies. I introduce *cisnormative empathy*, which emphasizes the importance of empathy among people with trans parents (and other close friends, family members, and allies) while offering a critique on—and describing potential dangers of—empathy that may reinforce rather than challenge cisnormativity.

Generally, participants view themselves as supporting their trans parents and envision themselves as supporting the trans community more broadly. Most participants feel that the biggest change to their self-conception has been an increase in a self-conception of empathy toward both the trans community and family members of trans people. Empathy toward the former is a result of loving and supporting their trans parent, while the latter comes from their own experiences navigating their parent's transition, interpreting their cis parent's and siblings' experiences, and the lack of resources dedicated toward supporting SOFFAs (trans people's significant others, friends, family, and allies)—especially people with trans parents—through transition.

Although participants see empathy as an important and positive way that their parent's transition has shaped their lives, it becomes somewhat of a paradox when situated within the research on trans people's self-regulation of gender- and self-expression. Many participants' descriptions of their trans parent's gender expression, including discussions of interactions with them, suggest that people with trans parents attempt to challenge oppressive ideologies surrounding gender through their love and acceptance, but paradoxically reinforce cisnormative regulation of expression through normative gender and transgender ideologies. In the present study, I use *cisnormative empathy* to discuss the importance of empathy as a precursor to support and acceptance, while also suggesting that combined with actions underpinned by cisnormativity, such as holding their trans parent to hegemonic standards based on gender and age, may be counterproductive to the needs of trans loved ones and the trans community as a whole. As cisnormative frames through which cis people navigate and negotiate their understandings of trans issues often hold trans people to normative and essentialist standards of sex and gender identity and expression

(Mathers 2017), unchecked cis empathy may unintentionally reinforce these standards by rooting it in—rather than challenging—cisnormativity. These frameworks that lead to cisnormative empathy may also reinforce transnormativity that legitimizes some trans people’s expressions and behaviors as legitimate while devaluing others (Garrison 2018; Johnson 2016).

### Empathy

Historically, the study of empathy has often fallen under psychology rather than sociology. Although sympathy has been examined in sociology by Mead, Addams, and Smith (as discussed by Ruiz-Junco, 2017), sociologists such as Cooley ([1909] 1983) and Hochschild (2016) examine empathy as not just understanding the suffering and injustices experienced by others, but also personally identifying with them. Clark describes empathy as an “imaginative leap into the minds of others” (Clark 1997:34), which requires the recognition of and emotional responses to others’ difficulties. Ruiz-Junco (2017) distinguishes different types of empathy, which include empathy frames (moral claims involving shared values), empathy rules (learned and internalized expectations of empathy), and empathy performance (how individuals display empathy, and are evaluated by others). Although not all participants feel a direct connection to the trans community via their parent, all recognize that the issues surrounding trans rights and broader public discourse on the trans community are relevant to their lives and their family.

In his discussion of societal mechanisms which shape and constrain empathy, McCaffree (2020) describes exposure to social diversity and the certain types of exchange relationships with individuals in outgroups as being important to the expression of empathy. While exposure to trans people might not be enough on its own to increase empathy, entering into exchange contexts where individuals share conversation, emotion, and body language may help to increase empathetic regard. While McCaffree explains this exposure in terms of demographic and spatial proximity as increasing the rate of these interactions and relationships, having a transitioning parent brings the proximity to trans people into the home and family life where exchange relationships may continually and frequently can occur between the parent and child.

On an individual level, Stets and Carter (2012) discuss the importance of a person’s moral identity, which includes the degree to which they see themselves as being honest, caring, kind, fair, helpful, generous, compassionate, truthful, hardworking, friendly, selfless, and principled. This identity, combined with cultural expectations around particular situations that dictate how individuals should think and feel, influences both moral behavior as well as degrees of guilt or shame for “immoral” behavior. It may be that people who describe themselves as supportive of their trans loved ones have a strong sense of moral

identity, and therefore believe that their behavior toward their loved ones is empathetic. Given the need for support by their family members as described by trans individuals (Pyne 2012; Travers et al., 2012; Veldorale-Griffin 2014), it is important to examine how empathy may unintentionally reinforce cisnormativity.

### Cisnormativity

Cisnormativity, a term first introduced to address trans erasure in a medical environment (Bauer et al. 2009), describes the “belief system that there are only two genders, that our bodies define our gender, and that our gender necessitates certain roles within families and society” (McGuire et al. 2016:60). For example, when we hear someone called, “dad,” we expect that person to look like a man in body and in dress. We expect that a person’s gender can be determined by visual cues (Kessler and McKenna, 1978), and assign gendered attributes such as pronouns and parental titles based on interpretations of visual cues, which are shaped by broader gender ideologies. These expectations and attributions, based on a rigid, essentialist, two-gender system, leave little room for trans people’s experiences, or for the fluidity of bodies, gender identities, sexual identities, and family definitions.

Cisnormativity is upheld through laws and policies that simultaneously erase the existence and experiences of trans, gender non-conforming, and intersex people while privileging the existence of cisgender people. Recent debates on so-called “bathroom bills,” which posit trans women as an imagined source of threat to cisgender women and children (Schilt and Westbrook, 2015), place an assumption on genitalia as the basis of gender identity. Being cisgender is often associated with naturalness (Goldberg and Kuvalanka, 2018), and leads to what Serano refers to as *cissexual*<sup>4</sup> *gender entitlement* (2016:166). This entitlement allows cisgender people to “consider themselves to be the ultimate arbiters of which people are allowed to call themselves women or men” (Serano 2016:166) based on social standards for gender normativity.

As trans people navigate social and cultural gender expectations in daily life, they are subjected to various ways in which they are held accountable for their gender presentation, not only in visual cues, but also in how they “do” gender during interactions with others (Kessler and McKenna, 1978; West and Zimmerman, 1987). Recent work in trans studies indicates that gender inequality is reinforced during interactions with the medical community (Davis, Dewey, and Murphy, 2016; shuster, 2016), the local neighborhood and social community (Jauk, 2013; Pyne, 2012), employers and co-workers (Schilt 2010), family and friends (Whitley 2013), and via language systems (Ericsson 2018; shuster, 2017). While most of this work on accountability is focused on how cisgender people and social systems uphold cisnormativity through the

experiences of trans people, few studies focus on the reactions and interpretations of the loved ones with whom trans people also navigate the social world. Through examining the experiences of people with trans parents, who may be a source of support and allyship, we can begin to understand the processes through which they may empathize with their parents' experiences as well as gaps in their observations and interpretations.

### **Trans Families**

Despite the development of queer family studies over the last few decades, in 2010, Biblarz and Savci noted that research on trans families was almost non-existent. The last decade, however, has seen an increase in research in this area (Reczek 2020). For trans people, family and friends may be an important source of support, although research indicates that many trans people continue to face rejection by their loved ones upon disclosing their trans identity or beginning a process of transition (James et al. 2016). For trans youth, having the support of their parents and other family members—especially those who are LGBTQ+ identified themselves, has a positive impact on their experiences of disclosure and expressing their identities (Robertson 2019; Travers 2018).

A growing body of work including research, documentaries, and popular media produced by and centering the experiences of significant others, friends, families, and allies (SOFFAs) of trans individuals provides insights into their perspectives of their trans loved one's identity, their relationship, and their experiences navigating transition (see, e.g., Pfeffer 2017; Tabor 2018; Travers, 2018). This includes redefining their relationship with their trans parent or partner, as well as rethinking their own sexual identity and community identity as related to their trans partner (as some queer partnerships may be read by others as heterosexual, or vice versa). A notable study by Whitley (2013) discusses how SOFFAs negotiate relational identities with their trans loved ones through the process of “undoing” and “redoing” gender, or how they actively resist traditional gender scripts, then reconstruct new scripts based on their trans loved one's gender. It is important to note that this undoing and redoing process is mediated by their own and others' understandings and perceptions of sexual orientation, social roles, and religion.

All members of the family take part in the transition through various ways including linguistic shifts, perceiving visible changes, and introspectively examining gender and sexual identities (Hines, 2006; Pyne, 2012; Veldorale-Griffin, 2014). Family members may begin to examine and renegotiate their own perceptions of gender and sexuality. Most families expect that family members are cisgender, and a trans person's disclosure challenges this notion (McGuire et al. 2016). While having a trans family member does not necessarily mean that the family will change or transform the meanings they hold regarding

gender, or the gendered associations they have regarding their family members (McGuire et al., 2016), trans families negotiate the tensions between gender identity and sexuality through both implicit understandings of gender salience and explicit conversations (Zamboni 2006). Families also have to reconceptualize their roles, boundaries, and meanings within parent-child relationships, which can lead to feelings of ambiguity regarding both the gendered role of the parent and the relationship between parent and child. Tabor (2018) refers to this as *role-relational ambiguity*, which may cause stress for people with trans parents and requires careful negotiation.

In a cisnormative and heteronormative society, trans families are subject to and fear discrimination on both interpersonal and structural levels. While normative assumptions about gender and parenthood can shape the way trans people imagine and desire parenthood, trans parents and their partners may also consciously resist normative cultural scripts regarding family forms and other life decisions (von Doussa, Power, and Riggs 2015; Pfeffer 2012), and through what Pfeffer (2012) refers to as “inventive pragmatism,” manipulate social structures to access resources that may benefit their families. However, current literature on the processes of trans-parented families rarely incorporates children’s perspectives. Noticeably absent is consideration of the ways in which children construct their experiences and the impact of their parent’s transition on their construction of their own identity. As trans parenting is an emerging area of study, understanding children’s perceptions and constructions may help to extend our understandings of the many dimensions of trans family experiences and paint a more complete picture of their lives and needs.

### **Cisnormative Empathy**

I define cisnormative empathy as a process through which SOFFAs consider themselves to be supportive and empathetic of their trans loved ones and the trans community as a whole, but may not consider how their love and support reflects and reproduces cisnormative (and in some cases, heteronormative and transnormative) ideologies. As Sumerau et al. (2020) explain, allyship defined by care, concern and understanding allow allies to feel supportive, but without any concrete challenges to systems of oppression. Although people with trans parents and other close friends and family members have strong potential to be effective allies for their trans loved ones and trans communities, the empathy through which their allyship is underpinned should be examined. LGBTQ+ people’s expectations of ally support is complicated; the definition of allyship is not fixed and varies even within a marginalized population (Forbes and Ueno, 2019). Forbes and Ueno (2019) find that LGBTQ+ expectations of allyship are diverse, and may want personalized support (i.e., supportive of loved ones) or broad support (for community as whole). My findings suggest

that empathetic self-construction, a precursor to allyship, may also straddle these two opposing camps of thought. However, if either type of empathy is underpinned by cisnormativity, allyship may fall short of their trans loved one's expectations.

Although several participants express difficulties with their parent's trans identity, I want to emphasize that cisnormative empathy is not a critique on the difficulties some people with trans parents experience while navigating their parent's transition. Dealing with complex emotions during major life changes is to be expected, and that is beyond the purview of this paper. I offer cisnormative empathy as a frame through which self-reported support for trans loved ones by SOFFAs may be more thoroughly examined, so that potentially harmful cisnormative ideologies may be challenged rather than reproduced. The key components of cisnormative empathy include support for trans loved ones underpinned by constructions of relationship survival as tragedy, as well as a self-construction of empathy that may simultaneously be supportive of trans people broadly while upholding cisnormative ideologies through holding space for non-acceptance. Additionally, I suggest the need for expanded and improved supports for SOFFAs, where they can grapple with complicated emotions of experiencing a loved one's transition while also challenging the cisnormative ideologies that affect trans people interpersonally and structurally.

### **Methods**

The process of creating meanings, as well as definitions and personal understandings of gender and sexuality, is complex and often difficult to articulate. Thus, I chose to complete semi-structured, in-depth interviews with individuals who have at least one transgender parent, in order to learn what they perceive as well as their interpretations of these perceptions regarding their experiences navigating their parent's disclosure of trans identity and transition. I received university IRB approval prior to recruitment, and I received a small internal grant to support transcription services and gift cards for participants.

Participation was limited to individuals ages 18–30 who were at least 10 years old when their parent began transitioning, and whose parents have stayed together thus far. Two participants whose parents recently split were included in the study, as their parents had initially planned to stay together through one parent's transition and did so for approximately two years after their trans parent's initial disclosure of trans identity. Previous research indicates that younger children have an easier time understanding and accepting transition, which has been attributed to their familiarity with transition in cartoons and fairy tales, while adolescents are in the midst of sexual development (Brown and Rounsley, 1996; Faccio, Bordin, and Cipolletta 2013; White and Ettner, 2007). Restricting participants to this age range allowed me to examine

the experiences of participants who were adolescents or young adults when their parent disclosed their trans identity to them and/or began transition, giving this experience close proximity to their own sexual development (Brown and Rounsley, 1996; Faccio et al. 2013). Previous research also indicates that many couples separate or divorce when one partner transitions and that it is difficult to tease out the effects of divorce from those of transition (Veldorale-Griffin 2014; White and Ettner, 2007), so this sample attempts to take immediate simultaneous divorce or separation out of the equation.

Other than age and timing requirements, I left participant criteria open in order to allow for a broad range of definitions of family, partnerships, and transition. While I use the term “parents” to explain the relationship between participant and trans individual/partner in their lives, this includes biological parents, adoptive parents, step-parents, legal guardians, or long-term partners of legal parents/guardians. There is considerable diversity among queer families (Moore and Stambolis-Ruhstorfer, 2013), and I am primarily interested in intact guardian relationships rather than a pre-conceived notion of how those relationships are defined.

The study sample includes 20 participants ages 18–30 (average age of 21.4) from the United States, Canada, the UK, and Australia. Recruitment was completed using flyers posted in 350+ LGBTQ+ and trans-specific community centers and online communities. Some participants saw the flyers firsthand while others disclosed that they received the flyer from one of their parents. The sample includes one sibling pair, meaning participants have 19 unique sets of parents. Self-reported racial identities include 18 white participant with white parents, one bi-racial white and indigenous participant with a bi-racial white and indigenous trans parent and indigenous cis parent, and one black participant with white (adoptive) parents. Participants learned of their parent’s trans identity between ages 10 and 27, with an average age of 18.7. Demographic information collected suggests that most participants’ families are working or middle-class.

Although most participants indicate that they lived with their parents for at least some time during or after learning their parent is trans, some participants were already living away from home. Some participants acknowledge that living away or spending time away from home (for instance, while away at college) allows them to compartmentalize their parent’s transition and have greater agency over how and when they have to actively navigate the changes in their family forms and functioning. The more time a participant spends living with or visiting their parents, the more opportunities they have to navigate and negotiate changes and processes that occur both within and outside the home.

Twelve participants identify as cis women, three as cis men (although one indicated he is now questioning his gender identity), and five on the trans



spectrum. Seven participants identify as exclusively straight, three identify as “mostly” straight or straight/questioning. The remaining 10 participants identify under the LGBTQ+ umbrella. Such a large proportion of LGBTQ+ participants is likely a result of recruiting techniques. Given the self-selection in participation, it is possible that of trans parents’ children, those who identify as LGBTQ+ have also gone (or are going) through the process of navigating their own identities. Additionally, it is possible that people within the LGBTQ+ community are more likely to have overall positive and supportive perceptions and understandings of their trans parent and family than their cisgender/straight counterparts. Although this could be considered a selection bias or limitation, I suggest that the large proportion of positive outlooks and thriving families described by participants within this study runs counter to cisnormative assumptions that a parent’s gender transition is inherently disruptive to families.

Of participants’ 19 sets of unique trans parents, participants report that 12 are women, three are men, and two are non-binary. One participant did not articulate her parent’s gender identity, though she said her dad (assigned male at birth) is trans and uses he/him pronouns as of the interview date. One additional participant did not give a specific gender identity for her dad (assigned male at birth) but explained that her dad’s “understanding of gender identity has changed.” Participants reported that their cis parents included 18 women and one man. All participants’ names are pseudonyms and all identifying information has been omitted or changed.

Interviews followed a semi-structured format with an interview question list as a guide, leaving room for additional probing when necessary (Charmaz, 2006). Upon completing each interview, I wrote additional notes about anything that might have not come across in the recording, such as participant demeanor, facial expression and body language, initial thoughts, and general observations. I typed up these memos for inclusion in analysis. All participants received at \$10 (or \$10US-equivalent for those residing outside the United States) e-gift card upon interview completion.

As an inductive study using in-depth interviews, I used grounded theory (Charmaz 2006) as the basis for my analysis, which I modified with narrative thematic analysis (Riessman 2008). Scholars using narrative thematic analysis may “keep a story ‘intact’ by theorizing from the case” (Riessman, 2008:53). As individual participant narratives were often connected in complex ways throughout the interview, I felt it was necessary to use narrative thematic analysis to further examine the themes I generated through the data. All interviews were transcribed using a professional service, which I then reviewed and corrected prior to analysis. Using NVivo software, I employed qualitative coding techniques to identify patterns in participants’ answers. Initially, I did line-by-

line coding, using some *in vivo* coding when specific language used by participants was important to the concept (e.g., “empathy” and “call her dad”), while making additional and overlapping codes for longer narratives that I also interpreted as a whole (Riessman 2008). I used color coding for both types of codes (one color for line-by-line and a different one for narrative), so that I could separate and/or compare them as needed. After initial coding, I completed axial coding based on patterns that began to emerge from the line-by-line coding and compared these to the narrative coding completed during the first round. Focusing on the similar themes generated through both coding systems, I wrote memos by hand in a notebook designated for this study from which I completed my analysis.

All aspects of a sample shape data and analysis, and this study is no exception. Although I do not claim my results to be representative of all people with trans parents, or even all people with parents who have stayed together through transition, through this study I identify patterns among participants that both support and expand upon prior research on trans families (such as Hines, 2007; Norwood, 2013; Tabor, 2018; Veldorale-Griffin, 2014). Additionally, nearly all participants’ parents being white (with the exception of one bi-racial parent) may have shaped data, as transphobia often intersects with racism to create disproportionate rates of violence and discrimination, (James et al. 2016), as well as affecting experiences of dating and intimacy (Buggs 2020), among trans people of color.

### **On Love, Support, and Acceptance**

All participants describe themselves as wanting to support their parents through transition—including love and acceptance for their trans parent. Several participants describe directly telling their trans parent that they love and support them in hopes that their parent would feel more comfortable. For example, Mike reflects on his response to his Maddy’s (trans woman parent) disclosure of her trans identity on social media: “She posted it on Facebook. I read through the post and, of course, I commented on it—this big long congratulation. ‘I still love you, I support you and everything you do’ comment.” Similarly public posts and comments of support may have similar positive effects to those in online support groups, where individuals with stigmatized identities can find encouragement, information, and empathy (White and Dorman, 2001).

Participants often reflect on the necessity of support for their parent, which they then generalize to trans people’s need for supportive family members. When asked what advice Taylor would give to someone who just learned their parent is transgender, she focused heavily on some of the personal difficulties trans people experience during transition:

Definitely love and support. Definitely, definitely, definitely. . . Minus all of the social and political aspects, transitioning within yourself is hard because you pretty much have to let go of everything you're used to and start to become uncomfortable with yourself. . . And so, that was something difficult and something that [my dad] needed support with, and something that just reassuring him and reassuring his identity, even to this day, helps.

Taylor's insistence on the need for encouragement is reflected in studies on trans people who feel that their partners, parents, and children are primary and/or important sources of support (Downing 2013; James et al. 2016; Zamboni 2006).

### *Still in Love or "Sticking it Out"?*

As a trans family member's identities shift, their family members may also reconsider the role of gender, sexuality, and relationships in their own lives (McGuire et al. 2016; Pfeffer 2017). People with parents who plan to stay together through transition observe shifting understandings of gender and sexualities of both parents, rather than just their trans parent. As their trans parent moves through transition, participants describe how they interpret both parents' identities through the ability to shift as well as changing definitions of their parents' relationships. However, shifting understandings does not necessarily include dismantling heteronormative or cisnormative assumptions about relationships, and may instead reproduce them. Although most participants construct themselves as being empathetic of their cis parent's decision to stay together through transition, their framings are often underpinned by heteronormative and cisnormative ideologies.

Some participants develop an understanding of their parents' relationship as being predicated on love being present regardless of gender or sexual identity. Jessica reflects on her understanding of her parents' relationship through her dad's (trans woman) transition:

They're still very close and they still act like a married couple which is lovely. I've asked [my mom] about it before, and she just said she's just in love with a person and it just so happens that that person is now a female and it's just the fact of life.

In taking the perspective of her mother, a cis woman whom she describes as "still identify[ing] as straight; she's just in love with my dad," Jessica understands that for her parents, sexual identity does not necessarily align with the love they have for each other. The questions and thought processes Jessica has regarding her mom's sexual identity align with previous research on cis partners of trans people, who may find themselves reformulating their own sexual identities given the tensions between gender identity and sexual attraction in culturally-held definitions of sexual orientation (Hines 2006; Pfeffer 2014; Whitley 2013). For example, Pfeffer (2014) describes how cis women partners

of trans men work to redefine identity labels in order to resist heteronormativity while also acknowledging how our current lexicon does not include language that accurately reflects the nuance of these relationships/identities.

Similarly, Suzie describes her mommy (cis woman parent) as “sticking it out” with her mom (trans woman parent). Her conceptualization of her parents’ relationship is underpinned by both heteronormative and cishnormative assumptions. Although her parents’ relationship through transition makes her reconsider her understanding of romantic attraction, the framing of her mommy as “sticking it out” reflects the assumption that a straight woman would not want to continue a relationship if her partner comes out as a trans woman. Heteronormativity is reflected in the idea that a self-identified straight woman would only want to be in a relationship with a man, while cishnormative ideologies suggest that romantic partnership could not survive through one partner’s transition.

Similarly, Jeffrey conceptualizes his parents’ relationship through the “example” that his mom set for Jeffrey and his siblings by staying together with their dad, a trans woman:

You know, my mom stuck with my dad—they’ve been together 38–39 years. Um, so my mom truly did marry her best friend and then just you know, my mom led by example. . . [she] was there, Mom helped her with her makeup, my mom helped her. . .pick out outfits. . .And about partway through the transition, I think it was right about the time my dad got her breast implants, when my brother and I offered my Mom an out. . .she turned it down. She goes, “You know I appreciate y’all taking care of me but I’m gonna stand by your dad,” so it was another great example.

The concept of “marrying your best friend” is typical in American marriage discourse, and research indicates that there are benefits to married couples who also consider themselves best friends (Grover and Helliwell, 2019). However, Jeffrey describes his parents’ relationship similarly to Suzie as he explains his mom as having “stuck with” and planning to “stand by” his dad, such that his mom is exercising strength or resiliency for staying together with her transitioning spouse regardless of what that means for her own sexual identity. Additionally, this framing of his mom’s reaction is also reflected in his description of her influence on his interest in potential partners:

I really look for some of the same qualities that my mother has. . . Well yeah, they’re definitely strong and—they’re strong and independent, and this is gonna sound kinda weird, but they work really well in crisis situations.

Jeffrey idealizes his mom’s reactions as an example of how a partner should react in the face of “crisis.” Although Jeffrey describes specific experiences from his childhood that could constitute crisis, such as his dad’s history of mental health emergencies, combining this language with the other language

he uses to describe his mom's decision to "stand by" or "stick with" her, having a trans partner could certainly constitute a "crisis" in this context. Resiliency is certainly an important discussion for those that experience transition of a family member (Titlestad and Pooley, 2014; Veldorale-Griffin and Darling, 2016), however, this may also reproduce similar heteronormative and cisnormative assumptions to those in Suzie's explanation of her parents by framing transition as a negative experience—even a "crisis situation"—through which a trans person's partner—or their children—have to "stand by" or "stick with" them in order for their relationship to survive.

### **Empathetic Identity and the Dangers of Cisnormative Empathy**

In addition to re-negotiating their understandings of their parents' relationship, participants navigate other ways having a trans parent has shifted their thinking and, in turn, how they conceptualize themselves as compassionate people. Research on lesbian and gay parenting indicates that their children are more likely to be accepting of diverse identities (Biblarz and Savci, 2010; Goldberg, 2007), and the present study appears to extend those findings to people with trans parents. However, participants focus on the empathy and compassion they have developed through their experiences, which they then fold into their self-conceptualization. Jenna reflects on her self-construction through her experiences with her dad's transition:

Looking back on it now, I think that's what helped shaped my identity, like I developed an overwhelming sense of empathy—I think watching my father and my mom go through everything, and learned a lot of compassion too cause it's not really any other way to handle what was going on some days, you just, you just have to be understanding like well this is just dad's going through a time, there's no point getting mad about it because tomorrow it's going to be different.

Participants frequently described the development of empathy as a direct effect of navigating their trans parent's disclosure and transition. Although only four participants used the word "empathy" to describe this development, nearly all participants used words and phrases like "understanding," "accepting," "compassion," and "open-minded" to explain changes in their own identities and in describing advice they would give to other people with trans parents. Generally, these discussions fall into two categories: (1) empathy for trans people and the trans community, and (2) empathy for SOFFAs (significant others, family, friends, and allies of trans communities).

#### ***Empathy for the Trans Community***

Most participants describe the need for greater support for the trans community more broadly. When discussing advice she'd give to those in a similar

situation, Sierra emphasizes listening and showing empathy for their trans loved one:

Listen and try to do what you can to understand. . .because no matter how hard it may be on you, it's at least ten times worse for the person who actually has to transition and come out and deal with the social consequences. I figure even if I don't understand what someone is going through, the least I can do is not be an asshole and at least try to understand. . .Listen. Be empathetic. . .Relating to [my dad's] comments of, "You kids coming out gave me the courage to deal with myself," it does seem like societal pressure is usually pretty shitty, but you can help balance some of that out with just being supportive.

For Sierra, empathy allows her to acknowledge her own discomfort while understanding the importance of listening and being supportive of her dad through her transition. Sierra, who is pansexual and has a gay brother, also says her dad felt more comfortable exploring her own trans identity once she had children with queer identities. The empathy Sierra describes is similar to that of other LGBTQ+ participants. Sierra feels having the social experience of identifying as LGBTQ+ allows for the ability to be more empathetic, and therefore, supportive.

Some participants describe beginning to take a more active role in trans rights and awareness as a result of their experience of having a trans parent. For Taylor, learning more about the trans community and broader LGBTQ+ community through her dad's transition inspired her activism:

Learning about my dad's transition really helped me to understand full-cycle about our community. It was even to a point where—at this time—a lot of teen suicide was going on when my dad first started transitioning, and it was all trans deaths. And I felt enraged, I guess you could say, because there's all these kids that are killing themselves because they wanna transition and their families are not supportive, and they're really unable to think of a future where they can be themselves and feel okay in their skin. And so, I see this and then I also see my dad. . .And my heart broke so much that I started creating events. And my first event was dedicated to Leelah Alcorn, and her story was a devastating one.

Taylor describes creating vigils and fund-raisers for Leelah Alcorn, a trans teen who died by suicide in 2014 and experienced lack of support from her parents. Alcorn's parents, along with many news outlets—then continued to describe her using her birth name and incorrect pronouns after her death (see, e.g., Fantz, 2015). Taylor feels familial support is a central necessity during transition, and Alcorn's suicide struck a sympathetic chord. Taylor's experiences with her dad's transition not only opened up a space for her to explore her own place in the LGBTQ+ community as a gender non-conforming person, but simultaneously allowed her to develop an overwhelming sense of empathy for trans people, especially for those who do not have familial support.

Some participants describe themselves as being more sympathetic and empathetic toward marginalized populations overall, as a result of their close

proximity to trans issues vis-à-vis their parent. Sandra feels that the biggest change to her self-construction to come from her experiences navigating her dad's transition is a greater sense of compassion:

I think I'm more sympathetic to minority groups. . . I think I've learned, I've definitely done a lot more fundraising, I would like to be a human rights lawyer after uni. . . And then I think I can relate to people because before—say if someone was upset—I wouldn't know what to say. So I think having experience having extreme emotions, like I think my friends would come to me more if they've got problems and things because I'm probably less judgmental and sort of more kind of empathetic towards that.

For Sandra, experiencing her dad's transition overall has led her to be more compassionate for others who experience oppression and marginalization in society. Like Taylor, this has led Sandra into action both in her career path and social life. Sierra, Taylor, and Sandra's descriptions of increased compassion all support and extend prior research indicating that children of LGB parents are likely to be more empathetic to diversity and people who are different from them (Goldberg 2007). It is likely that people with trans parents who are supportive of their parent's transition are more likely to understand the marginalization of the trans community through their close proximity. For some, their compassion may be articulated as focused on empathy for the trans community, while for others, the experiences of one group's oppression opens their eyes to the marginalization of other groups.

### *Empathy Performance and Development of Self-Empathy*

Some participants describe the development of empathy for other SOFFAs through their experiences. They acknowledge the difficulties of navigating a family member's transition with little outside support, but also focus on the conflict between their support for the trans community and the complications experienced by SOFFAs. These participants, who describe themselves as supportive of their trans friends, say they do not understand why they have such difficulties with their parent's own transition. Laura reflects on this when discussing her emotions regarding her dad (a trans woman):

I have friends at school who are trans and nonbinary and I am definitely respectful of that and try to be as respectful and supportive of them as I can be but after finding out that my dad is trans it's—I'm still just as respectful, but it's complicated by the fact that it's not entirely a positive thing to find out that my dad is trans. It's messier. It feels hypocritical kind of on both ends. It feels hypocritical to not be supportive of my dad when I'm supportive of my friends but also the other way around.

The feelings Laura describes are situated in the difficulties she has had navigating her dad's transition, while also constructing herself as someone who is supportive of trans people more broadly. These emotions draw her self-

construction into question, as she struggles with competing discourses of internal struggle and public acceptance. Laura's feeling of hypocrisy is reflective of her public appearance of support and acceptance, especially when it comes to her trans and non-binary friends. Ruiz-Junco (2017:424) refers to this as *empathy performance*, in which individuals visually and verbally indicate shared meaning and feeling between people, regardless of whether that empathy is genuine. Laura indicates that this performance feels hypocritical now that she has difficulty providing the same empathy for her dad.

Laura also describes the changes she has seen in herself through her experience navigating her dad's transition:

But, when you see things often about parents whose kids are trans at least in the circles that I run in—social media wise—there's often criticism of the parents for not being accepting and whatever, and I think parents should always be accepting of their kids. . . . Knowing myself as someone who tries very hard to not be transphobic it can still be difficult to put that into practice when you know that your feelings are not necessarily logical or rational. You can still have those difficult feelings. So, my friend came out as nonbinary in the past year and so has been dealing with a lot of stuff about name changes and telling family, and I've definitely been more than willing to listen and be sympathetic, but I can also see why. You know they'll say, "Oh, you know my mom is really having trouble with this and why can't she just understand?" "Well, give her more than a couple of months for it to really sink in."

Laura's difficulties in her own navigation of her dad's transition have led her to be more empathetic toward family members who may also have difficulties navigating their loved one's transition. However, her feeling of empathy is at odds with the sympathy and compassion she feels for her trans and non-binary friends who are dealing with conflicted family members. This double bind may make it difficult for her to navigate each—her dad's transition and supporting her friend's difficulties with their mother—as the messages related to each situation are at odds with each other (Bateson et al. 1963).

Sari describes similar feelings of ambivalence as well as her path to developing empathy for SOFFAs, starting with a trans friend when she was around eleven years old:

When we were little, we would have play dates where she would say, "I want to be a girl." So [her parents were] like, "Many years ago we thought we had a son, we were wrong, we had a daughter." I was not surprised at all and I was like, "Oh my God, that's great, wonderful." . . . And so from that time up until my dad, I was fully onboard. And then with my dad I was not completely onboard I think because it was my dad and it was like, "Wow, this is a huge change to my life." And then after my dad it was like I started thinking more about how it affected those [around] trans people. I still am in support of trans people and I think very much so. I think it just opened my world view a little more to include their families. So I think when my friends tell me, "This person in my family is not accepting of me." I'm thinking, "I can understand where they might be coming from, that must be difficult for



them." But I can't say that to that person. So it's more like the same acceptance, but I can understand the other side as well.

For both Laura and Sari, being supportive of their trans friends (and trans rights in general) while feeling unsupportive of their trans parent feels hypocritical. This may be influenced by another dimension of difficulty in dealing with their parent's transition. In Norwood's (2013) discussion of competing discourses with which individuals have to contend while constructing meanings of their trans family members' identities, her description of judgment-imposing social networks generally only includes those who may not accept trans identities and experiences. Laura and Sari's experiences indicate that trans-affirming social networks might impose judgments on those who are ambivalent about their family member's trans identity, leading to the double bind of feelings of conflict and hypocrisy.

Among trans/non-binary friends and within the perception of an affirming community, Laura and Sari worry if they disclose any sort of ambivalence about their parent's transition, or disclose difficulty regarding the process of adjustment, they will be seen as unsupportive, or worse, transphobic. Sari worries that she will be judged "for not being one hundred percent okay with it," and thus often avoids telling others that her dad is trans. She feels that her experience with her dad, and her difficulty in fully accepting her dad's transition, has made her more understanding of others' ambivalence about their trans loved ones. These participants' perceptions of the public discourse in support of trans people is that the message is often very rigid, that trans people require acceptance without question, and that their identity and needs should be prioritized over those whose cisgender and heteronormative identities are destabilized through trans acceptance. Their interpretation of this message leaves little room for the struggles loved ones—especially those who consider themselves supportive of trans people and rights more broadly—experience throughout a family member's transition process.

Although Laura and Sari both articulate their constructed empathies as being directed toward other SOFFAs, it also appears that they are developing a sense of self-empathy (Jordan 1991), though which they can forgive themselves for the ambivalence they feel about the disparity between acceptance of their friends and acceptance of their parents. Laura's and Sari's experiences are indicative of the complicated nature of SOFFA relationships, as they simultaneously hold space for empathy for trans communities as well as empathy for those who are not accepting of their trans loved ones. While a supportive process for SOFFAs is certainly needed in order to come to terms with these complicated emotions, it is important to acknowledge that empathizing with a lack of trans acceptance upholds cishnormative ideologies, which continue to be pervasive across society (Westbrook and Schilt, 2014).

## Discussion

The present study expands on the literature on transgender people's families by exploring the perspectives of their children, who are often left out of more general discussions about the experiences of SOFFAs. As trans people often see family members as important sources of support (Pyne 2012), the perspectives and experiences of their children expands the breadth of family-based support networks for trans people, while making the argument that self-constructions of empathy and support are complicated and should be addressed. For participants, experiencing a parent's transition may come with difficulty navigating internal feelings of confusion, as those emotions are then balanced with a growing understanding of trans marginalization within society. Some participants also report feeling that they are expected to show the same support for their trans parent that they do for their trans friends, and express internalized tension when they have a harder time navigating their parent's transition.

Overall, participants see themselves as loving and supportive of their parents and envision themselves as supportive of the trans community more broadly. This leads to participants developing an empathetic identity or understanding of the self (Mead 1934), which may include feelings of increased empathy for the trans community, other SOFFAs navigating their trans loved one's transitions, and self-empathy as a way to forgive themselves when they express difficulties with the navigation process. As empathy is an important precursor to effecting social change (Ruiz-Junco 2017), I have shown that it is necessary to critically examine self-described empathy and the role it may have in upholding cisnormative ideologies, a process that I have termed "cisnormative empathy." If left unexamined, cisnormative empathy can contribute to the cultural and social expectations that hold trans people accountable to normative sex and gender expectations in daily life.

Taken together with other research on cisnormativity in language and interactions (e.g., Ericsson, 2018; Mathers, 2017), this research can add to a multi-faceted perspective on how normative sex and gender expectations may be upheld, even by those who construct themselves as empathetic and supportive. This research may be used to further examine the messiness of allyship, where self-proclaimed allies to trans loves ones and the broader trans community may have good intentions, but are unaware of how their interpretations (e.g., a cis parent "sticking it out" with their trans partner) unintentionally reinforce normative constructions of gender, sexuality, and family. This allows allyship to be confined to individualized remedies for the structural oppressions that affect trans people, rather than offering concrete challenges (Sumerau et al. 2020). Caring, kindness, and empathy are important for trans people's loved ones to practice individually, but do little to reach beneath the surface to

examine and challenge individual cisnormative beliefs and wider practices and understandings.

Through this study, I have also shown some of the tensions between participants' support for trans loved ones, and the need for support for themselves while they navigate their parent's transition. The dearth of formal support systems for SOFFAs—and particularly for people with trans parents—leaves many participants to rely on their own experiences and understandings of gender as they construct support for their parent. Future research should include analysis of SOFFA support systems (e.g., social media-based support groups, in-person SOFFA groups, and therapists who work with SOFFAs directly), including how they are accessed and utilized, and how cisnormativity may be challenged and/or upheld in those contexts. The pervasiveness of cisnormativity and its internalization makes it difficult to challenge, having a support system for SOFFAs that does not challenge cisnormativity may reinforce, rather than tear down, some of the social barriers their trans loved ones face.

#### ENDNOTES

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<sup>1</sup>I use the terms *transgender* and *trans* interchangeably as umbrella terms to describe individuals whose gender identity does not necessarily match the sex category to which they were assigned at birth (Schilt and Lagos, 2017:427). Throughout the study, this term includes those who identify as gender non-conforming and non-binary except where individuals specifically distinguish their gender non-conforming identity from a trans identity.

<sup>2</sup>I use the terms *cisgender* and *cis* interchangeably to describe people whose gender identities match their sex assigned at birth. This term is preferred over terms such as “biological” man/woman or “non-transgender,” since their identities are unnamed or taken for granted, unlike the identities of their trans peers which are often marked and scrutinized (Pfeffer, 2017).

<sup>3</sup>For trans individuals, no two transitions are the same. I used a broad definition of “transition,” and I do not assume that it has an exact start or end. For some, transition is a life-long process while individuals continue to negotiate personal, social, and political identities (Roen, 2001b). While many trans people stay within the male–female (or man–woman) binary, some individuals transition toward a non-binary or genderqueer identity. As such, and to avoid categorizing trans people as binary or non-binary (Roen, 2001a), I define transition as a movement away from assigned sex at birth, where assigned sex is based on the appearance of genitalia (Serano, 2016). I define the “starting point” as the time where the participant first became aware of their parent's transition, either through disclosure or personal realization.

<sup>4</sup>Serano uses the term *transsexual* to “describe anyone who is currently, or is working toward, living as a member of the sex other than the one they were assigned at birth (2016:31).” She uses to term *cissexual* to describe “people who have only ever experienced their subconscious sex and physical sex being aligned” (2016:33). For more on discussion of distinctions between her use of the terms *transsexual*, *transgender*, *cissexual*, and *cisgender*, please see *Whipping Girl* (Serano, 2016:23–34).

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