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Psychology

Families as Pillars: Exploring the Impact of Family Support on the Mental Health and Well-being of Trans and Gender Diverse Youth

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Support is hard to come by

- Adolescents and young adulthood – parental/ family support important to navigate normative life changes (e.g., moving away from home, starting a new job)
- For some families, providing support can be challenging – trans and gender diverse youth
- Parents have cited several barriers:
 - beliefs and attitudes about gender (e.g., essentialist beliefs),
 - their emotions (e.g., fear over the safety of their young person, grieving a future dream of being a grandparent),
 - perceiving a lack of social support (e.g., not knowing other families with TGD youth, anticipating negative evaluation from wider family) and,
 - a lack of knowledge about gender identity and TGD challenges

(e.g., Matsuno et al., 2022; Morgan et al., 2022a; Pullen Sansfaçon et al., 2020; Wagner & Armstrong, 2020).



Support is good

- Support is associated with:
 - increased likelihood of living as one's affirmed gender,
 - fewer mental health symptoms,
 - reduction of suicidal ideation, and increased help-seeking

(Russell et al., 2018; Samrock et al., 2021; Tan et al., 2021; Weinhardt et al., 2019).



Gaps in current understanding

- Support is good but hard to come by
- Mostly quantitative work from the perspective of parents and families.
 - How do TGD youth perceive family support? What was this like during COVID-19?
 - Why and how is family support protective or harmful for the wellbeing of TGD youth?

Family & Covid-19

- Initial stage of COVID-19 (spring/summer 2020):
 - Young TGD people didn't feel supported in their gender at home (or they had to hide their gender)
 - The negative implications were worsened as couldn't access 'buffering' support (e.g., at school, college).



Exploring the mental health experiences of young trans and gender diverse people during the Covid-19 pandemic

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ABSTRACT

Background: Both anxiety and depression have been identified as negative health outcomes associated with the distressing nature of the Covid-19 pandemic, especially among young people. Within this age demographic, trans and gender diverse people may be particularly vulnerable to pandemic-related mental health outcomes, such as anxiety and depression, due to the social challenges, gender dissonance, and poor mental health they experience. Furthermore, the social distancing measures impose several unique social and help-seeking challenges which may further contribute to the worsening of mental health. While there has been acknowledgment that vulnerable populations may be disproportionately affected by the pandemic, the experiences of trans and gender diverse youth have received very little empirical attention.

Aims: To explore the mental health impact of Covid-19 on the lives of young trans and gender diverse people in the UK.

Method: In total, 243 people took part in an online survey between May and July in 2020. Eighty-two people were removed due to providing insufficient data. The analyzed dataset therefore comprised of 161 respondents ranging from 16 to 25 years ($M=20$; $SD=2.68$). Participants were asked how social distancing measures had impact on their social lives, mental health and access to health services. They were also asked to complete validated measures of anxiety and depression.

Results: This study found that those who experienced a greater impact of the Covid-19 outbreak and its associated social distancing measures, reported poorer mental health. Lack of social support, negative interpersonal interactions, unsupportive and non-affirming living environments and the inability to access mental health support and gender-affirming interventions were all factors that were associated with poor mental health.

Conclusion: The findings provide specific direction for the tailoring of mental health service delivery to this population, noting the need for private, safe spaces in which young people can feel supported and have their gender identity affirmed.

KEYWORDS

Anxiety; coronavirus; Covid-19; depression; gender diverse; mental health; trans; youth

Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic poses a global risk to mental health (World Health Organization (WHO), 2020a) and, identifying its impact on mental health is a scientific priority (Holmes et al., 2020). The psychologically distressing nature of the Covid-19 has been linked with reduced wellbeing and increased stress and anxiety, resulting in a proliferation of Covid-anxiety studies (e.g., Lee, 2020; Milman et al., 2020). Evidence suggests that as well as being correlated

(Lee et al., 2020; Wang et al., 2020). Consequently, there is an urgent need to support the mental wellbeing of community members to avoid a global mental health crisis (Choi et al., 2020).

However, the impact of the pandemic is not experienced equally across communities (O'Connor et al., 2020; Templeton et al., 2020; Van Bavel et al., 2020). While it is known that existing mental health conditions can place individuals at greater risk of mental distress during these unprecedented times (Brooks et al., 2020),

Experiences of family support

- Family support is complex:
 - Conflicting and contradictory
 - Conditional

“My dad is supportive in that he supports me getting HRT, but he has been extremely resistant to getting my name changed and is by far the slowest person in my life regarding using my new name and pronouns.”



**“[He] can be supportive, but at times I feel he is ashamed of me”:
understanding the relationship between parental support and quality of
life amongst trans and gender diverse youth in the UK**

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ABSTRACT

Background: Trans and gender diverse (TGD) youth often report poor relations with their parents and perceive these to be core to the mental health difficulties they experience. One aspect of psychological wellbeing that has not been well explored in relation to parental support is Quality of Life (QoL).

Aim: To test the association between perceived parental support and QoL and, understand from the young person's perspective how parental support contributes to QoL.

Method: To address these aims a multi-methods design was used and 140 TGD youth aged 11–19 years old from the UK took part in an online survey in 2020. Validated measures of parental support and QoL were used in conjunction with open-ended survey questions about experiences of parental support.

Findings: As expected, we found a significant and positive association between parental support and QoL. Two themes were found in the qualitative data: (1) Parental support is not black or white, (2) Knowledge is a catalyst for affirmative parental support.

Conclusions: Our findings demonstrate the positive implications of affirmative family support on QoL but at the same time highlight how parental relations can be complex and frequently conditional. Organizations supporting young TGD people (e.g. those working in education, healthcare) should prepare young people for the complexity of family relationships. Knowledge and awareness were felt to be an important tool in increasing the likelihood of parental support, but affirmative and evidence-based support needs to be made more readily available.

KEYWORDS

Gender-diverse; parental support; quality of life; transgender; youth

Introduction

It is well established that trans and gender diverse (TGD) youth are vulnerable to poor mental health and wellbeing (e.g. Drabish & Theeke, 2022; Jones et al., 2019, 2023). Within the field, it is widely acknowledged that the high prevalence of poor mental health among TGD youth has a social cause and therefore can be attributed to unwelcoming and harmful experiences often encountered (Brooks, 1981; Hendricks & Testa, 2012; Meyer, 2003; Riggs & Treharne, 2017). Social stressors can be both interpersonal (e.g. peer rejection, bullying) and structural (e.g.

on the mental health and wellbeing of young TGD people is parental support (Gaspar et al., 2022; Hendricks & Testa, 2012).

Parental support that affirms a young person's gender identity (e.g. using correct pronouns) is associated with an increased likelihood of living as one's affirmed gender, fewer mental health symptoms, reduction of suicidal ideation, and increased help-seeking (Russell et al., 2018; Samrock et al., 2021; Tan et al., 2021; Weinhardt et al., 2019). However, supportive parental bonds can be hard to come by for TGD youth (Fuller & Riggs, 2018; Pullen Sansfacon et al., 2020).

Experiences of family support

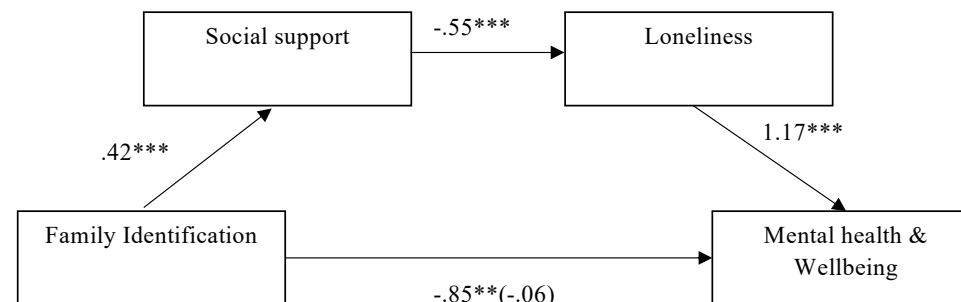
- Education is the catalyst for support:
 - Misinformation in the media informed parents' attitudes towards their young person
 - Attitudes could change, even when previously felt to be unchangeable
 - Reliable and credible information was hard to come by
 - Media was dominant, young people's voices were lost

“Like my mum, dad had only really heard about trans people in the media so had lots of preconceived ideas about what a trans person’s experiences may be like, and since I didn’t fit his expectations, [he] was doubtful of my gender identity initially.”



Why is family protective? (In Press)

- Evidence to say it is (quant) but young people are telling us it isn't (always)
- Feeling a sense of belonging to family is protective of mental health and wellbeing as it increased perceived social support and decreases loneliness (Study 1; N= 140)
- Social Identity Approach to Health – the Social Cure/Curse



Study 2: (N=27)

- How young people experience family support? What is the lived experience? Does this help explain contradictory findings?

Theme	Subtheme
1. I Can't Be Me When I Am Around You	
2. The Psychological Costs of Authenticity	2.1: Lack of Felt Understanding 2.2: Limited Opportunity for Identity Talk
3. Increasing the Likelihood of Receiving Familial Support	3.1: Acceptance of Imperfect Family Support 3.2: Capitalising on the Shared Experience of COVID-19
4. The Missing Part of the Jigsaw	4.1: Family Can Be More Than Blood 4.2: Shared Experience Increases Felt Understanding 4.3: Staying Connected to One's Chosen Family During COVID-19

1. I Can't Be Me When I Am Around You

*“I wish I could be open and, you know, yeah open with my family about it [gender identity]. Um, I think at the moment it would be, it’s not the right time because, it’s not the right time for me because I know the reaction is going to be negative and it’s going to be difficult and I’m not in the right space or frame of mind to deal with that at the moment. **I think that it would be detrimental to me. I think it would be detrimental to our relationship. I think like it would make my mum’s and I relationship worse even though it isn’t great**” (Tate)*



2. The Psychological Costs of Authenticity

“P: They [family] are, they are understanding rather they understand what it is but they’re not happy to accept, well, the difference.

I: Uh, so you say perhaps they’re not happy to accept that, why do you think that might be?

P: Well, they think I’m not their normal child they expected, what they class as the norm.

I: And how does that make you feel?

***P: Very isolated, lonely, pushed to one side, not wanted.”** (Kai)*



3. Increasing the Likelihood of Receiving Familial Support

▪ 3.1. Acceptance of Imperfect Family Support:

*“I think for most trans people their parents are like, in this country, are like broadly accepting of it but it probably will like struggle with like calling them by the right thing or gendering them the right thing or like always talking to them in the right way and I think people aren’t necessarily very prepared for like the **complexity of how parents will be supportive in some regards and unsupportive in others and how to deal with that.**” (Jett)*



3. Increasing the Likelihood of Receiving Familial Support

- 3.2. Capitalising on the Shared Experience of COVID-19 to Access Family Support:

*“Definitely over pandemic I’ve managed to kind of um speak to her [Mum] more about like issues regarding my gender identity especially, um and because **she’s like more know-knowledgeable about it now uh I am able to open up about more things to her**, which impacts me more positively.” (Jo)*



4. The Missing Part of the Jigsaw: Family of Choice

- 4.2. Shared Experience Increases Felt Understanding:

*“Um, and the positive aspect of the connection [with others who have a similar lived experience] was that **it really helped me to feel understood and it helped to realise I am not alone in what I’m experiencing** or the things I’m feeling or, you know, the fact that I’m worried-I’m wondering am I trans enough, you know, it’s very validating to connect with people and then they say oh I went through a similar thing or, you know, or even if I haven’t quite experienced that but I can see where you’re coming from is enough.” (Skyler)*



Rounding up

- Family support is psychologically protective but consistent and affirmative support is hard to come by
- When it is available, it increases perceived social support and reduces loneliness
- Withholding support or being conflicting in the support offered leaves young TGD people feeling misunderstood, isolated and lonely
- Support needs can be met by family of choice
- When parents demonstrate a 'readiness', education (credible sources) is very powerful



Thank you!



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