

# The Lived Experiences of Transgender Students: A Phenomenological Study

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**Abstract** – This phenomenological study explored the lived experiences of seven transgender students from Isabela de Basilan. It focused on parental acceptance and rejection in their families. The study used a qualitative design to describe how participants felt accepted or rejected by their parents. In-depth interviews were the main method of data collection. Data were coded and analyzed using thematic analysis, following Moustakas' approach, to identify essential themes. The themes revealed that while participants had varying family experiences as transgender individuals, they also shared key similarities, particularly regarding their coming-out process and specific patterns in their families' responses. Participants highlighted that their families often showed acceptance, affection, support, and respect, aligning with findings from prior studies that reinforce the importance of parental acceptance. However, some families demonstrated hostility, indifference, or rejection, creating mixed experiences for transgender students. The study found that acceptance during gender identity exploration or after coming out significantly impacted participants' well-being and self-acceptance. This supports Gorrese's (2013) findings that acceptance from family and peers can foster self-worth and positive self-views in transgender individuals.

**Keywords**— Lived Experiences, Parental Acceptance, Parental Rejection, Phenomenological Study, Transgender Students.

## I. INTRODUCTION

The LGBTIQ+ community, especially the group of transgender individuals, continues to be marginalized. (International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Intersex Association [ILGA], 2016). Despite widespread prejudice against transgender individuals around the world, the Philippines is regarded as rather tolerant, with a rising awareness of varied gender identities. In recent years, more people have been publicly recognized. As society's understanding of gender diversity grows, families face new obstacles in navigating acceptance. In this context, transgender individuals, particularly students, may experience severe emotional distress throughout the coming-out process, owing to the potential acceptance or rejection by family members, especially parents.

Previous research has shown that supportive familial reactions can help to reduce these issues. Nevertheless, there has been little research on the emotional experiences of transgender women during this important age, even though evidence reveals that a lack of familial acceptance is substantially connected with negative mental health outcomes.

The researcher has heard many stories from transgender friends about the struggles they faced with their families specially during the coming out experiences. These stories

showed the importance of studying parental acceptance and rejection, which led the researcher to explore these experiences in detail.

This study aimed to explore transgender students' lived experiences in terms of parental acceptance and rejection within their families. Based on the characteristics of the Parental Acceptance-Rejection (PAR) Theory, it may be possible to predict how transgender students may feel when they come out. The study focused on capturing the actual experiences of transgender students in Isabela de Basilan.

## Statement of the Problem

The research aimed to explore the lived experiences of transgender students in terms of parental acceptance and rejection in their families.

Specifically, this study sought to answer the following questions:

1. What are the coming-out experiences of transgender students in relation to parental acceptance and rejection?
2. How do parental acceptance and rejection influence the lives of transgender students?

## II. METHODOLOGY

### A. Research Design

The study employed a qualitative-phenomenological research design to address inner feelings that aren't tested in daily life. The study examined the depth of the phenomenon and offers readers a comprehensive understanding of the meaning and significance of transgender women's lived experiences (Smith, 2004). As such, the study focused on the lived experiences of transgender women students.

Participants in the study were asked to complete an open-ended, semi-structured interview guide to identify their specific experiences. It asserted that individual experiences can be interpreted in multiple subjective and reflective ways. The goal of this phenomenological study was to explore and comprehend transgender women's lived experiences through a qualitative approach, using open-ended questions during interviews to collect data. The strength of an exploratory, qualitative design is that it allows participants to elaborate on their answers rather than being forced to give a set of answers.

In addition, the interviews allowed participants to be more actively involved in sharing their detailed lived experiences and perspectives on this study.

### B. Research Respondents

Participants in this study are all transgender women who are students aged 20-39. The mentioned age range was based on the psychosocial development theory proposed by Erik Erikson in 1958 and 1963, which states that young adulthood is a vital stage of development with a major influence on a long-term trajectory, which the researcher feels will yield an in-depth conclusion to the study's problem.

The researcher employed a non-probability sampling method, specifically, a Snowball sampling, to select the participants. The participants are transgender women who are students and have come out to the public. These samples were selected according to the study's criteria.

Inclusion Criteria include: (1) transgender women, who are students living in Isabela de Basilan, (2) who are biologically born male and identify themselves as a woman; (3) who are "out" or have already expressed their gender identity to their parents and to the public. To appeal to young individuals (students), the participants were between the ages of 18 and 25.

C. Data Analysis

Data gathering procedure

Upon the approval of the informed consent and the questionnaire, a formal letter of consent, which included the study's purpose and explanation of what the study's participation entails, was given to each participant.

The semi-structured interviews were used. Prior to the interview itself, the participants were provided with the interview guidelines and tape-recording permission forms, which sought their permission to record the interviews, as the researcher wanted to be open throughout the procedure. Each participant was duly informed of the researcher's identity and intent through the consent form, which stated that the participants understood the purpose of the study and their participation was voluntary. Thereafter, the researcher applied the phenomenological approach by conducting an interview with each participant. The researcher asked each participant a series of open-ended questions. Data collection through interviews lasted 20-45 minutes, depending on the amount of information shared, and an audio recorder was used to record and transcribe the interview. The researcher carefully followed safety precautions for handling, processing, and destroying the data. All the files were deleted after the desired data had been collected to ensure data protection and confidentiality against possible spread of sensitive information.

After transcribing, the participants checked the transcriptions to ensure they accurately captured the meaning and intent of the subject's contribution, thereby making the results accurate and reliable. From then on, the researcher conducted a comprehension of the phenomenon and its definition.

Statistical treatment of the data

In this study, a phenomenological research design was used. This helped explain the themes and patterns that the participants expressed. According to Moustakas (1994), identifying the phenomenon under examination is the first step in the research process. The strength of a qualitative design was that participants could elaborate on their answers rather

than be constrained to predetermined options. Moreover, the in-depth interviews allowed participants to be more actively involved in sharing their lived experiences of parental acceptance and rejection. At the root of this study, a phenomenological approach, "the intent is to understand the phenomena in their own terms to provide a description of human experience as it is experienced by the person, allowing the essence to emerge" (Cameron, Schaffer, & Hyeon-Ae, 2001, p.34). Data were analyzed using Moustakas' phenomenological data analysis process after being collected through phenomenological interviews.

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A. Summary of Essential Themes of the Lived Experiences

TABLE 1. Summary of Essential Themes of the Lived Experiences

Organizing Themes	Basic Themes	Description	
<b>Experiences in Coming Out</b>			
Warmth-affection	Warm	Physical	2
	Loving relationship	Verbal	3
Hostility-aggression	Resentment		1
	Anger Hostility		
<b>Lived Experiences</b>			
Indifference-neglect dimension	Abusive		1
Undifferentiated rejection dimension	Lack of concern		
	Lack of Love		

Table 1 shows that the essential themes revealed in the respondents' interview statements highlight four types of behavioral responses by parents towards their child. Five (5) of the seven (7) participants experienced warmth, affection, and acceptance, both physically and verbally. Hence, their parents showed acceptance, affection, support, and respect to her as their child, despite her gender identity. Meanwhile, one (1) out of seven (7) participants experienced acceptance with a slight rejection that showed resentment, and one (1) out of seven (7) participants experienced acceptance with slight rejection that falls under the Indifference-neglect dimension of rejection. Despite experiences falling under the Hostility/Aggression and Indifference/Neglect dimensions, the parents still showed acceptance, affection, support, and respect for their children.

The first theme described the coming-out experiences. Participants indicated that regarding the timing of their coming out, most of them acknowledged that they had become aware of their gender identity early in life, particularly during childhood. Nonetheless, they publicly revealed their gender identity only during their early adulthood/emerging adulthood phase. Frequently, this occurred during their teenage years. The participants reported being aware of their gender identity. For them, this awareness showed that they truly understood who they are. They recognized themselves as women rather than as a gay. As they became more aware of their gender identity, they expressed it through feminine clothing, physical appearance, behavior, and even friends. The following was Athena's statement recognizing their gender identity as part of who they are.

Ariana discloses that “Since birth naman, I know na in myself that I am already a transgender woman”. Also, “I see myself as a woman so paninindigan ko to” (I see myself as a woman so I will really stand to it). As a result, “I realize that I am truly a transgender woman.” Baecia characterized her gender expression as a way to validate her gender identity, as she said, “After I realized that I am a woman and not gay, I grew out my hair and everything else followed.” (After I realized that I am not gay, that I am a woman, transgender woman, I started to maintain long hair, then everything followed). She added, “Minsan pag sa school pag may activity kailangan ko maging magmukhang lalake pero I look like a woman, charing!” (Sometimes at school, when there is an activity, I have to be present myself as a man, so I dress like a man, but I look like a woman.)

Devasurendra (2021) said that coming out is a personal decision and different for every transgender woman, but in a way that feels safest for them. Some choose to come out before they make any changes that other people can see, like changing how they dress or getting gender-affirming treatments. Some choose to come out after or during the process.

The parents of these students have different qualities and types of relationships with their transgender daughters. Additionally, their family relationships have shown both acceptance and rejection.

Transgender women are reported to be doing things with their families, spending time together, and engaging in activities. The following are some statements that support this:

From Elliah, she said that “Sabay na kame ni mama naga eat out ganern and then yun na yung mga shopping de aw, punta ng public market, mabuhay, saan saan, hilig namin yan and yung mga pagmamarites, chika-chika na yan” (My mom and I usually eat out together, and we both like doing window shopping, going to the public market, to Mabuhay Trading, and gossiping together) While Baecia stated, “Oo, pumupunta kami ng tiangge, bili there and that.” (Yes, we go to town and do shopping together.)

While Cae and Florae stated that their family compliments their appearance. Florae said that she usually gets an appraisal. As she stated, “Nagbibiruan lang yan ni mudra minsan. Then si pudra naman sarcastically says pag mag go ako school nakamake-up, “Wow maganda ka man. Di ko alam kung joke or totoo basta alam ko sarcastic yan lagi si pudra.” (Mom and I usually joke sometimes. When I go to school, my dad sarcastically says with make-up on, “Wow, you're beautiful. Sometimes I don't know whether it is true or if he's just joking around. Cae also said, “Noon, magsabi 'yan, gwapo-gwapo, pero ngayon, magbiro-biro 'yan, siya na ang ganda! Ganda!” (She used to call me handsome, but now she jokes around and says that I am beautiful).

Additionally, the second theme described the lived experiences of parental acceptance rejection that affect the students' lives.

Based on the in-depth interviews with these students, their relationship with their family has positive effects on their lives. Here are a few quotes from the interview transcripts:

Ariana stated, “My relationship with my family is really good, super good. Wala na akong masabi. Bongga lang. And it feels good.” (My relationship with my family is very good.)

Dahlia added, “Kaya ako close kay Mama kasi siya yung laging andyan. I can feel she is my safe space. Mothers know best, nga di ba? And I feel there is nothing wrong with who I am, pag nanjan mama ko.” (That's why I'm close to my mom because she's always there for me. She is my safe space, and there is nothing wrong with who I am when I am with her.)

Elliah also mentioned, “Masarap sa feeling na kung may kailangan ako, most of the time anjan sya lagi.” (It is good to know that if I need something, she's always there.)

And Baecia said, “...there's this time when I wore a beautiful color lipstick, and they complement me.” That day I felt so beautiful, yung parang miss universe ako sa ganda, maybe the way nila sinabi and the time na sinabi nila.” (...there's this time when I wore a beautiful colored lipstick, and they complemented me. That day, I felt so beautiful that I felt like Miss Universe.)

Also, families of these transgender students were somewhat supportive of showing and expressing themselves as women in society. Some participants said:

From Ghalia, “Yung papa ko, he lets me feel na kahit hindi ako babae by birth, yung love, support, financial, lahat anjan lang siya.” (My father lets me feel that even though I'm not a real female at birth, the love, support, financial, and everything will always be there.)

Cae mentioned, “... okay lang gamitin ko ano gusto kong self-expression, basta 'wag lang ako ma-bully, kasi if i-bully na daw ako of how I look, diyan na daw siya magagalit at pagbawalan ako sa mga bagay-bagay.” (... It is okay for me to do what I want, as long as I make sure that I won't be bullied because of my appearance. If that happens, he might get upset and start restricting me from expressing myself as a transgender.)

The statements show that transgender students are supported by their families through a positive reaction. According to the literature, coming out may lead to stronger family ties (Pistella et al., 2016), and family support is linked to the development of sexual identity (Biledeau & Renn, 2005). This suggests that families, especially parents, support their transgender children in both overt and covert ways, as evidenced by the literature and participant answers.

Despite being accepted by their families, these students still occasionally endure family rejection for various reasons, which can be shown in the actions and words of their parents and how parents would tell them something about their gender identity.

As shown in the study by the students of the University of Santo Tomas, “Psychological Well-being of Filipino Transgender Individuals”, they found that “transgender individuals who believe their parents are accepting typically experience positive psychological well-being.” As quoted in the transcripts, Ghalia stated, “Nung nalaman ko na tanggap nila ang pagkatao ko, it was easy for me to open up sa ibang tao.” (When I found out that my parents accepted me for who I am, it was not difficult to open myself to other people.) She added, “Maybe din kasi, whether my friends or other pips will

accept me or not. Okay lang, I don't care na as long as okay na sa parents ko." (Perhaps, whether my friends or other people accept me or not, it is okay, as long as my parents accept me.)

From Florae, "Mahirap din kasi mag-open up sa friends lalo na sa school if sa family ko pa lang di na ako accept. Di ba? Family ko nga di ako matanggap, iba pa kaya?" (Coming out as a transgender woman is challenging, especially among my school buddies. My family does not accept me for what I am, what more, my friends?) Then she added, "Pero parang uso naman din sa iba, ahm yung friends muna makaalam bago magka-guts na mag-go-go-go out na sa family ganern." (But it is already common for some transgender individuals to open up first with friends before family.)

As stated in the coping sub-theory of PAR, which states that some individuals manage rejection more successfully than others, according to Rohner et al. (2012), individuals may be categorized as effective copers. These are individuals who depersonalize rejection and do not internalize blame.

Elliah mentioned, "Alam naman natin na lahat ng transgender dumaan muna sa masakit na salita whether intentionally said or not." (As we know, every transgender individual goes through being subjected to hurtful words, whether they were meant that way or not." She added, "Sa pagkakaalam ko, walang perfect na coming out experiences sa aming trans. Lahat kami may kanya-kanyang challenges sa pag-e-express ng self namin sa parents namin. Hindi naging madali, but andito na, tapos na, okay na finally." (To my knowledge, there is no such thing as a perfect coming-out experience for us transgender individuals. We all have our own challenges when expressing our true selves to our parents. It wasn't easy, but we're here now—it's done, and finally, everything is okay.) Baiae stated, "Huy, ano ka? Maghirap mag-out. Ahm, it's like, ah... parang ano oh, kakain ka ng sili na di ka naman kumakain ng maanghang." (Coming out is really hard. It's like eating chili when you're not even used to spicy food.) She added, "Pero sa una lang naman naging masakit, naging mahirap ipaintindi pero later on, shoot sa banga na agad. Parang walang nangyari. Magigising ka na lang na okay na pala ang lahat." (But it was only painful at first. It was difficult to make them understand, but later on, everything just fell into place. It was as if nothing happened, you just wake up one day and realize that everything is already okay.)

After all data were transcribed and analyzed, codes and themes were generated. The themes indicate that the participants revealed different experiences of transgender women and some unique similarities.

#### IV. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

##### *Conclusion*

This study explored the lived experiences of transgender students regarding parental acceptance and rejection. The findings showed that most student participants in Isabela de Basilan experienced warmth and acceptance from their families, including love, support, and respect. This family support was strongly connected to a better quality of life for the transgender women.

Every person has a unique life story. However, to grow and succeed, a person needs to feel valued, supported, and accepted. With the love and guidance of parents, children are better able to face life's challenges and develop a healthy sense of self, enabling them to study and dream of achieving their goals.

##### *Recommendations*

Recommendations are provided for the following:

1. For the Community: Higher education institutions should create policies that include non-binary students and members of the LGBTQ community, which includes transgender individuals, not only male and female students. Schools can also review and adjust their dress codes, haircuts, and other policies to better respect and support diverse gender expressions. This way, transgender individuals will have a safe place and space in the community.
2. For the School: Schools should take action to reduce stigma against LGBTQ students, which includes transgender individuals on campus. They should develop and improve programs that promote acceptance, protect their rights, and involve parents in supporting LGBTQ students. This can also help improve how the community views LGBTQ members.
3. For the Family: Parents of LGBTQ children, including those who are transgender, should show love, support, and acceptance of their child's identity and expression. This helps protect their child's well-being and allows parents to better understand what their children are thinking and feeling. By being patient and open-minded, parents can build a stronger connection with their children and respect who they truly are.
4. For future researchers: There are still several areas that require more research; however, this study has many useful applications. In particular, take into account cultural, religious, and other factors that will influence the study participants' actual experiences. Researchers are urged to broaden the study's focus. Additional members of the LGBTQ community should be included in future studies due to the small and less varied sample.

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