



Working with transgender young people and their families: A critical developmental approach

by Damien W. Riggs. London: Palgrave.

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To cite this article: Reviewed by Adam W. J. Davies (2021): *Working with transgender young people and their families: A critical developmental approach* , Journal of LGBT Youth, DOI: [10.1080/19361653.2021.1876580](https://doi.org/10.1080/19361653.2021.1876580)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/19361653.2021.1876580>



Published online: 28 Jan 2021.



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BOOK REVIEW

Working with transgender young people and their families: A critical developmental approach by Damien W. Riggs. London: Palgrave.

Until recently, and even in current times, many mainstream transgender children and youths' narratives are framed through stories of loss and struggle, particularly as it pertains to how parents and caregivers come to support their trans child. While many parents and guardians do accept, embrace, and affirm their trans children, it is still the norm that many parents take time and require professional assistance in accepting and affirming their trans and gender-diverse children (von Doussa et al., 2020), or might experience their child's coming out as a sense of loss (Wahlig, 2015). Importantly, Damien W. Riggs's (2019) new book, *Working with transgender young people and their families: A critical developmental approach*, addresses the loss perspective prevalent within common developmentalist research on transgender children and families. Riggs theorizes a "critical developmental approach" to supporting transgender children, youth, and their families in clinical care through a lens that deconstructs existing power relations involved in the constitution of categories of gender and the developmental norms that are taken-for-granted. Such a genealogical approach to conceptualizing the history of gender development in developmental psychology is important for challenging cisgenderism, or "the ideology that delegitimises people's own understandings of their genders and bodies" (pp. 6–7). Riggs explicates how many medical practitioners rely on cisgenderist knowledges and presumptions in their professional practices with transgender children and youth and their families. Providing rich case study examples, Riggs illustrates how cisgenderism infiltrates practitioners' approaches to clinical care in their usage of binarized language, their descriptions of trans clients (in terms, such as gender "aligning" with assigned sex and "transgendered"), and particularly, how practitioners and parent and guardian figures often question transgender children's sense of self-knowledge and understanding.

As a faculty who teaches in a predominately developmental psychology undergraduate program, Riggs' text offers many important interventions into both the fields of developmental psychology and clinical care and mental health professions. Many developmental psychology programs and academic research still operate within positivist paradigms that do not encourage reflexivity about the knowledge foundations being taught, or critical questioning from students engaging with the materials. Riggs advocates for therapeutic and clinical practitioners and researchers to be critical of the knowledge foundations being employed. A component of this is imperatively conceptualizing children as experts in their own understandings of their gender identities—a challenge to recent debates around clinical care for trans children that posits "desistance" theories (such as the work of Zucker et al. 2018). Importantly, transgender activists and academic scholars (such as Pyne, 2015; Temple Newhook et al., 2018), are actively critiquing the medicalization of gender identity and how transgender children and youth are psychiatrized. Similarly, Vipond (2015) notes the normalization of medical knowledges into transgender narratives and the infiltration of neoliberal individualistic narratives of "transnormativity." Riggs' work is in conversation with all of these debates as he positions his work critically within clinical, developmental, and cultural studies work on gender. Notably, Riggs critiques the Diagnostic Statistical Manual (DSM) category of "gender dysphoria" for cisgenderist¹ and gender essentialist

presumptions, continuing the critiques of such categories from the aforementioned scholars.

Throughout his work, Riggs employs fictionalized case studies to contextualize his writings and theorizations with “real world” examples. These case studies provide concrete examples of clinical care with transgender children and youth and their families to contextualize Riggs’ writing and recommendations for practice. As a reader, I found these case studies helpful in placing Riggs’ recommendations into clinical settings and for illustrating the dynamics that can take place between parents, siblings, and transgender children and youth themselves. In these case studies, Riggs often focuses on how cisgenderism cumulatively impacts parents/guardians, siblings and transgender children. This focus on family dynamics—arguably the overarching emphasis of the book itself—is important in conceptualizing the familial dynamics that impact transgender children and youth in care and the six case studies do a well-rounded job of approaching various issues, such as puberty blockers, parental transphobia, sibling jealousy, media representations of trans identities, and expectations for gender expression of transgender children and youth. For example, in one case study, Riggs describes a transgender youth, Hannah, who is able to explore her own gender expression and self-conceptions of femininities, without feeling pressure to conform to dominant understandings of femininity through separating her understandings of gender expression and gender identity. These kinds of examples are useful for clinicians to begin to problematize their own understandings of gender identity and gender expression and where they might be employing cisgenderist and cisnormative logics.

Riggs’ work is important for scholars in LGBTQ studies and children and youth studies in terms of his proposition of gender as a “feeling” (as well as other similar interventions into poststructural theories of gender, such as Julia Serano’s (2007, 2012) work. Riggs (2019) explicates how gender is about “how, cumulatively, a range of sensory inputs make us feel, and whether those feelings that we experience when reduced through language to a binary system of categorisation are experienced as familiar and ‘like’ us” (p. 37). Importantly, in his case studies and their descriptions, Riggs contributes to current debates around biological essentialism, metaphysical essentialism, and social constructionism in transgender and gender diverse individuals’ understandings of and experiences with their gender identity (see Bialystok, 2013; Davies, 2020a, 2020b; Vipond, 2019). For scholars in LGBTQ studies who are unfamiliar with developmental models for conceptualizing gender development and identity, Riggs’ work does a thorough job of deconstructing some of the dominant models in developmental theories and their pitfalls, such as the work of prominent American psychologist, Sandra Bem (1983). For scholars who are seeking to understand developmental models for gender and their critiques, Riggs’ work is very useful.

Since Riggs’ text is more applied in nature, there is not as much mentioning of transgender studies scholars and theorists or cultural studies theorists. Due to Riggs’ work being in conversation with developmental theorists, this is expected, although it might make this text more relevant for scholars in clinical and developmental psychology or LGBTQ psychology than cultural theorists and scholars. Riggs engages with some transgender studies scholarship, such as the works of Julia Serano (2018), Roen (2019), and Pyne (2017), but this text might be particularly useful for current mental health/therapeutic practitioners or developmental scholars who are interested in working with transgender children and youth or examining current best practices. Further engagement placing developmental theories in conversation with cultural studies theories and works from transgender studies, such as the classic edited collection by

Stryker and Whittle (2006), might have deconstructed the common divide between cultural studies theory and developmental psychology.

Another area that would assist Riggs' text is an increased focus on whiteness and race within his text. His text does not explicitly discuss race or whiteness, even though there are trans and critical race scholars who place transgender studies, black studies, and queer of color critique in conversation with each other (Ware, 2017). However, this might be due to the ultimately developmental focus of Riggs' text, where conversations of race and whiteness are still lacking in the overarching field. A stronger engagement with both critical race scholars, as well as a sense of Riggs' positionality in an unpacking of whiteness in the field of developmental and clinical psychology and within interactions with families would provide a more critical lens. Riggs (2019) notes that he is a "nominally cisgender (i.e., not transgender) man" (p. 1), but his ethno-racial background is still not mentioned in this context.

As well, Riggs makes clear that his book is about transgender children and youth who operate within the gender binary and that further work is required for those who are outside the gender binary or gender fluid. His acknowledgement of the necessity of further work that focuses on the needs of non-binary children and youth is important as future research and academic work—particularly for clinicians and developmental psychologists—needs to move beyond the gender binary in their approaches to working with transgender children and youth. Clinical psychologist, Dr. Diane Ehrensaft (2016), has started this work, which Riggs mentions, while still critiquing her work for potentially promoting a pre-discursive "truth" about gender that could be interpreted through a biologically essentialist lens.

As a scholar in gender and sexuality studies (Davies, 2020a, 2020b; Davies et al., 2019; Greensmith & Davies, 2017), I find Riggs' work to be an excellent and well-detailed addition to the field that I would use in my classes and highly recommend. Riggs' work is further relevant for researchers, academics, and students in developmental psychology for his deconstruction of the cisgenderism within developmental theorizations. As such, this book would be incredibly useful for teaching at the undergraduate level with students who are in psychology courses in gender and sexual development or with graduate clinical students in mental health pre-service education programs.

Note

1. Riggs (2019) uses the term "cisgenderist" throughout the text. Although there is not a clear definition in the text, he explains that cisgenderist assumptions presume "there should be some 'congruence' between assigned sex and gender" (p. 47). Similar to how "developmentalist" is often used (including in Riggs' text), cisgenderist might be understood as a set of epistemological, theoretical, and ontological assumptions that erase the subjectivities of trans and gender creative children and reinforce the binary as a taken-for-granted truth.

Notes on contributor

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<https://doi.org/10.1080/19361653.2021.1876580>

