



# **Gaslighting: a weapon of dominance against trans and gender diverse people**

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## **Abstract**

Gaslighting is a form of psychological manipulation, dominance, and control. It has recently become recognised to occur not only within interpersonal relationships, but also institutionally, structurally, and socioculturally. Very little is written about how gaslighting becomes operational in the context of cisnormativity where trans and gender diverse (TGD) people are the target. Early 2021 the Australian National University's (ANU) Gender Institute and Centre for Learning and Teaching, released a handbook of gender inclusive recommendations for the university to adopt. A small section of the recommendations was introducing gender inclusive language to be used within curriculum and when addressing student parents. To understand how gaslighting is used as a tool of dominance against TGD people, an analysis of the online public comment in response to online news coverage of the recommendations was conducted. This involved analysing the discourse used by online commenters and examining the gaslighting that was present. This analysis was informed by trans theory along with literature on interpersonal, institutional, and structural gaslighting along with literature on the discourse surrounding TGD people who undertake pregnancy, childbirth, and lactation. Various methods of cisnormative trans-erasing gaslighting was consistently used throughout the online public comments to impose structural and institutional cisnormativity, repronormativity and erasure of TGD people. The impacts of this gaslighting on an already marginalised community is also discussed.

## DECLARATION

*"I certify that this thesis:*

- 1. Does not incorporate without acknowledgement any material previously submitted for a degree or diploma in any university; and*
- 2. To the best of my knowledge and belief, does not contain any material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the text."*

*Signature of student*

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'J. M. ...', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

*Date: 15<sup>th</sup> November 2021*

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## Chapter one: Introduction

Gaslighting is a relatively newly identified phenomenon within psychoanalytical, philosophical, and sociological theory. Though gaslighting as a term has been said to have been used colloquially since the 1960's, Robin Sterns seminal book *The Gaslight Effect; How to spot and survive the hidden manipulation others use to control your life*, published in 2007 (Stern, 2007) began to bring the term into popular psychological discourse. From there, gaslighting has become more widely understood, written about, and discussed. Gaslighting as a popular term and phenomenon derives from a 1938 play by Patrick Hamilton, and subsequent 1944 film by George Cukor, *Gaslight*. This film is the story of a newly married couple Paula and Gregory. Gregory attempts to make Paula question her perceptions and reality by dimming and brightening the gaslights. When she discusses this with husband Gregory, he makes her feel she is imagining it and works at convincing her she is going crazy. The description of the behaviour he displayed has since been referred to as gaslighting. Gaslighting is a social/psychological tactic of violence and manipulation that undermines the reality, interpretive abilities, and perception of the targeted person to create an environment where the target will adopt the gaslighter's perceived reality (Abramson, 2014; Catapang Podosky, 2020; McKinnon, 2017; Stern, 2018; Spear, 2019). I became interested in learning more about gaslighting when I came across Stern's book in 2020. I found the book so compelling, that I read it cover to cover and couldn't put it down. Whilst reading, I was pondering and identifying with the ways I had experienced interpersonal versions of gaslighting. I started to recognise that some of these tactics of gaslighting related to my experience as a gender diverse person in cisnormative spaces.

Cisnormativity describes the social assumption and expectation that all people are cisgendered<sup>1</sup>. This term was first used academically by Bauer et al in 2009. They used the term to describe social spaces where it is expected that everyone is cisgendered. When a person is not, they are erased or othered. Ciscentric is a term that describes settings, discourse, and structures where cisnormativity is central and exclusive. I live within a cisnormative society that excludes and renders me invisible. Who I am and how I experience the world, does not exist in most contexts. I came to realise that this erasure I have experienced as a gender diverse person many times within the public and private domains of my life is gaslighting.

Within cisnormative social and cultural structures, there is a large amount of hate speech, exclusion, trickery, as well as institutional, structural, cultural, and interpersonal dominance, and control against the trans and gender diverse (TGD) community. The TGD community are people who have a gender identity other than the one they were coercively assigned at birth, this includes agender<sup>2</sup> people. I began to realise that as a tool of cisnormative dominance, the tactic of gaslighting is utilised against me undermining my reality and existence as a gender diverse person within a cisnormative society. I am framing this specific kind of gaslighting that targets the humanity and existence of TGD people as '*ciscentric trans-erasing gaslighting*'. I was interested in understanding more about how this type of gaslighting is utilised. This thesis will use a case study to identify the gaslighting tactics that are used by a cisnormative dominant culture against TGD people's bodies, lives,

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<sup>1</sup> Cisgender – a person whose gender assigned at birth aligns with who they are

<sup>2</sup> Agender – a person who does not identify with a gender identity

and experiences. I will argue that *ciscentric trans-erasing gaslighting* is deeply entrenched within society.

The case study I am using to understand *ciscentric trans-erasing gaslighting*, is a part of the public response to the Australian National University (ANU) Gender Inclusive Handbook released February 2021. This handbook was funded by the ANU Gender Institute and the ANU Centre for Learning and Teaching. This 26-page document was the culmination of many people's input and outlines how to create a gender inclusive campus and pedagogy. This document was created in response to the ANU's efforts to meet equity and inclusion goals within the institution. They highlighted recommendations to improve the social belonging of all students and provided strategies on how to be inclusive in teaching and address challenging behaviours. The aims were changing habitual masculine centric and heterocentric language and structures that operate within the university.

A section of the recommendations was in response to support the visibility and inclusion of TGD people and non-heteronormative students who were parents and/or pregnant and/or lactating (ANU, 2021, p. 11). These recommendations included the use of gender inclusive language within curriculum and when referring to student parents. The terms they recommended were 'breast/chest feeding'<sup>3</sup> and 'human/parent's milk' rather than 'breastfeeding' or 'mother's milk'. They also recommended using 'gestational/birthing parent' instead of 'mother' and 'non-gestational/non-birthing parent' instead of 'father'. These terms were aimed at including TGD people into the discourse of parenting. They recommended this when addressing any student parent until that parent disclosed how

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<sup>3</sup> In this thesis chestfeeding refers to a term some TGD people may use to describe the process of feeding a baby at their chest.

they would like to be referred to. This recommendation received media attention with eight Australian online news articles<sup>4</sup> reporting on these inclusive language recommendations. Accompanying these articles were corresponding online public comments made in response. My research will analyse these public comments.

Richardson-Self (2020) conducted a political aesthetic and thematic analysis of online public responses to law changes in Tasmania in 2019. 'Tasmania's Justice and Related Legislation (Gender and Marriage Amendments) Bill 2018' making 'the recording of sex/gender on birth certificates optional' (p.297). Her study involved analysing the public comment on the Facebook page of *The Australian* who had produced news coverage of this Bill. She found an overwhelming ciscentric hostile response online within the comments. She asserts that this hostility can create an 'aesthetic' that undermines the dignity and safety of TGD people. In her study she argues that the foundation of the public comment she analysed was the sociocultural attachment to what she referred to as the perceived 'Truth of sexual dimorphism' (p.313). This being the notion that there are two distinct biological sexes and the assumption that sex and gender are synonymous (p. 310). My analysis and discussion will build upon her valuable insights by qualitatively unpacking the public comments in my case study. I will be delving further into understanding how the public use *ciscentric trans-erasing gaslighting* within online spaces as a weapon of dominance and control. My study will contribute to this emerging body of literature looking at the status of TGD people within online public representation and commentary.

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<sup>4</sup> Seven articles written for Newscorp's *The Daily Telegraph*, *The Sunday Mail*, *The Advertiser* and *news.com.au* and one with *The Canberra Times* owned by Australian Community Media.

The effects of *ciscentric trans-erasing gaslighting* are all too familiar to me. As a gender diverse person who grew up in the 80's and 90's I have experienced several decades of being gaslighted and policed by cisnormativity, beginning from a very young age. I found writing this thesis as a TGD person, with my naming of, and calling out ciscentric trans-erasing gaslighting, ignited some of the familiar feelings within myself of being gaslit. At times I felt immobilised, distressed, highjacked, lost and confused, unable to recognise myself and my sense of reality when writing this. At times I felt that sense of distortion, confusion and disorientation, the all too familiar feelings that sit within someone who is experiencing the effects of gaslighting. I describe this feeling as a '*gaslit fugue*'. I have chosen the term of fugue as adapted from a 'dissociative fugue' that refers to a sense of amnesia, dissociation, loss of one's connection to their identity, and an inability to connect with the present moment reality. A fugue is time limited in that it can last hours, days or even weeks until it eventually passes. I claim that successful gaslighting can induce a *gaslit fugue* for the target. This fugue can last until they are able to reconnect again with their sense of self, perceptions, and reality. I found myself within a gaslit fugue at points through writing this thesis. I could notice a distinct difference to my clarity of mind improving and internal distress easing when I was able to free myself from its clutches. I pulled myself out of the gaslit fugue, by recognising the gaslighting and talking with family and friends who knew the context I was writing in and could help me to reconnect with my sense of self and reality. I am appreciative of that support as it has meant I have been able to complete this thesis and call out this type of gaslighting and its affects.

Along with making sense of the gaslit experience, my thesis has been able to place the responsibility of ciscentric trans-erasing gaslighting where it belongs, with the cisnormative gaslighter. My hope is for any TGD people who might read this and relate to it,

that they are able to do the same. This thesis comes with a content warning for trans and gender diverse readers. It contains public comments that hold hate speech, gaslighting, mockery, and 'crazy making'. There is also discussion of the gaslighting that is directed at the TGD community. For the readers who are trans or gender diverse, remember your humanness, your goodness, and the richness you bring purely as the beautiful human being you are. You bring the required refreshing and delightful diversity from the dominant social constructs that constrain us all. Take care of yourself when reading this and do reach out for support if you need it.

The visibility of trans and gender diverse (TGD) people is continuing to grow. We are shifting from being perceived as the bizarre, the tragic, the entertainment, the immoral and the other. We are more visibly participating in everyday life, including within pregnancy, childbirth, and lactation. The stigma placed upon TGD people along with the cisnormative curiosity, pity, pathologisation, ostracisation and violence that the TGD experience elicits, is being contested. With this contestation and visibility, the hierarchical nature of gender and society leaves TGD people vulnerable to violence and hate crime (Colliver & Silvestri, 2020).

The social inclusion of TGD people is a human rights issue (Divan et al., 2016). The cisnormative and heteronormative community and structures exclude TGD people and police gender as a method of social dominance and control bestowed on the TGD community (Colliver & Silvestri, 2020; Divan et al., 2016). Gaslighting can be an effective and often subtle tool of this social dominance and control that is used knowingly and unknowingly to oppress individuals and collective groups of people (Davis & Ernst, 2019; Ruiz, 2020; Stark, 2019; Wozolek, 2018). Social Dominance Theory argues there is an organisation of hierarchy that operates within society that creates benefits and advantages

for some and not others. This is based on where a group or person sits within the hierarchy (Nicol, 2007). These hierarchies can play out in the interpersonal domain as well as socio/politically (Nicol, 2007). To exclude and silence groups of people, dominant cultures can use tactics of abuse and violence. (Bender-Baird, 2018; Roach Anleu, 2009). This violence can include micro aggressions, the gaze, othering a group of people through discourse as well as forms of abuse (Mulholland, 2013; Mulvey, 1975; Roach Anleu, 2009; Stark, 2019). Further, violence is intimate in nature and can involve gaslighting.

To understand *ciscentric trans-erasing gaslighting*, this study will analyse how gaslighting is used specifically to enforce repronormativity as an imposition upon TGD people. Feminist scholar Katherine Frankie in her 2001 essay coined the term 'repronormativity' in a response to how motherhood was constructed against a set of social roles, norms, and expectations. The term has continued within trans theory to include the heteronormative practices of parenting that are hierarchically imposed upon TGD people (Karaian, 2013).

Trans theory will inform my analysis and discussion. Trans theory includes self-identification, intelligibility, autonomy, embodiment, and desire encapsulating the disruption and destabilising of the notion of fixed categories of identity gender and sexuality (Chaudhry, 2019; Elliot, 2010; Nagoshi, Nagoshi & Brzuzy, 2014; Stryker, 2004).

Transnormativity is a term I will use in this thesis. McDonald (2006) appears to be the first academic noting of transnormativity. They describe it as the certain cisnormative conditions one must meet to be considered an 'official' trans person. That is to be a 'true' trans person an individual must align as closely as possible to a cisnormative binary ideal of gender. The terminology I will use within this thesis is as follows. The 'gaslighter' refers to the person

using gaslighting. The 'target' is who the gaslighter is attempting to gaslight. I have purposefully chosen the term 'target' to demonstrate that the target of gaslighting is not necessarily impacted by the gaslighting. I aim to demonstrate within this study, that gaslighting is the choice of the gaslighter regardless of the target's response.

Whilst the media framing and portrayal of TGD people within the articles of my case study provided an interesting display of gaslighting within itself, I was most interested in the online public comment that followed as this more closely reflects the abuse that TGD people experience. It is important to note that the people who responded to the articles through commenting, are likely to reflect a certain section of society and existing audiences of the various news sites accessed. With some readers required to pay for access to the articles makes this even more so. A person's public online comment reflects their social group values, especially on controversial issues (Stylianou & Sofokleous, 2019). Group belonging forms a part of one's identity (Rösner & Krämer, 2016). The more a person identifies with a certain group, the more they conform to that group's norms. (Stylianou & Sofokleous, 2019). Analysing online public comment is useful as it garners public opinion that can contain less inhibition and self-awareness due to the anonymity and online nature of the medium (Rösner & Krämer, 2016) Commenters also have less concern for the effect of their behaviour when commenting online (Rösner & Krämer, 2016).

Individual prejudicial comments can reflect the group norms of the group that individual belongs to (Hsueh, Yogeewaran, & Malinene, 2015). This means that in the case of cisnormative commenters, the prejudice in their comments towards TGD people, can reflect the prejudice within cisnormative group norms. My research uses this online public comment to investigate how gaslighting is used as a tactic of violence to assert power

dominance and control over trans and gender diverse (TGD) people. This will also provide more insight into the social cultural perceptions that manifest into the treatment of TGD people. Online commenting can influence the opinions, attitudes, and behaviours of those that read them (Rösner & Krämer, 2016; Rösner, Winter, & Krämer, 2016). Even reading one 'uncivil' online comment can increase the readers hostility towards the target (Rösner, et al., 2016). Online comments can influence the readers prejudice both consciously and unconsciously and can extend to the offline world where these prejudicial attitudes are displayed towards the target group (Hsueh, et al., 2015). This paints a picture that online comments have some offline influence on the social prejudice towards a marginalised community such as TGD people. Richardson-Self (2020) argues that hostility within public online comments undermines the assurance that TGD people will be treated with dignity and respect

I conducted a qualitative interpretive analysis of the discourse surrounding TGD people and reproduction used within the public comment using a discourse analysis (Walter, 2019). I read through every individual public online comment corresponding to the 8 online news articles. I noted and extracted themes within the comments that reflect discourse surrounding TGD people undertaking pregnancy, childbirth, and lactation. I then read through the comments again pulling out the comments to be used within chapters three and four to demonstrate these themes as well as the use of gaslighting. To maintain the anonymity of the public commenters, the public names they used have been replaced by 'Commentator 1, Commentator 2 ...'. This appears alongside the name of the author of the article. I use these comments to discuss the tactical violence of gaslighting that is used in efforts to assert dominance and power, through the silencing, erasure, and undermining TGD people bodies, lives, and experiences. This is along with the maintenance of status and

hierarchy within dominantly situated cisnormative social spaces and identity. My lived experience of *ciscentric trans-erasing gaslighting* and its impacts, along with my personal understandings and insights as a TGD person who is a parent that has undertaken pregnancy, childbirth, and lactation, also informs my analysis. This work contributes to the growing research around gaslighting as well as what is written for and about trans and gender diverse people.

Chapter two of this study is a review of gaslighting literature within the disciplines of psychology, psychoanalysis, philosophy, sociology, feminist theory, race theory and queer theory. This will include literature related to TGD experiences of gaslighting. Chapter three is a literature review of the discourse surrounding TGD peoples in relation to pregnancy, lactation, and childbirth from trans theory, feminist theory, queer theory, public health, psychology, and sociology. There is a distinction between chapter four and five. Chapter three is an analysis and discussion of the case study, focussing on the themes in the comments. Chapter five will be specifically highlighting the gaslighting that occurred within the commentary and outlining the mechanisms and tools of *ciscentric trans-erasing gaslighting* that were utilised.

## **Chapter two: Gaslighting, a literature review**

Within this chapter I discuss the literature on gaslighting. Gaslighting is a recent emergence that differs from microaggression and other forms of interpersonal violence and manipulation. It involves destabilising the targets perceptions, self-trust, and sense of reality. It is a form of control where the gaslighter aims for the target to adopt the gaslighters reality over their own. This chapter looks at how the literature has evolved from being regarded an interpersonal phenomenon used to maintain power and control of one individual over another, to also becoming part of sociological, feminist, race, and queer theory. Gaslighting will be highlighted as a tactic of violence used in the process of maintaining power and control over marginalised groups. The literature spans the disciplines of psychoanalysis, philosophy, sociology, feminist theory, race theory, first nations experiences and queer theory.

### **Interpersonal gaslighting**

Robin Stern's seminal book on gaslighting was first published in 2007, then reprinted in 2018. Stern is a practicing psychoanalyst who found a 'sickeningly familiar' interpersonal theme within her work with clients that she describes as the 'gaslight effect' (p.7). Her book is a self-help guide to inform readers of gaslighting and recognising when one is being gaslit. She offers case scenarios, questionnaires, self-help lists, and tools. She describes the gaslighting as a participation of two parties. The gaslighter as one 'who needs to be right to preserve is his [*sic*] sense of self and his sense of having power in the world' (p.3). The gaslightee (target) is the second 'who allows the gaslighter to define her [*sic*] sense of reality because she idealizes him and seeks his approval' (p.3). She argues there are two underlying

mechanisms that make gaslighting operational. First is the gaslightee's investment in and or dependence on the gaslighter. The second mechanism describes the underlying threat from the gaslighter upon the gaslightee. This can take the form of the gaslighter's angry outburst, criticism, accusations, shaming, undermining, personal attacks, rejection, threat of abandonment to outright physical violence and other forms of abuse. The underlying threat of this painful, shaming and or overwhelming event for the gaslightee at the hands of the gaslighter is always present whether it occurs or not.

Stern describes three types of gaslighters. The 'glamour gaslighter' who uses charm and deception through praise and blame, creating a world, that when the gaslighting begins the gaslightee dismisses it. The second is the 'good guy gaslighter'. This gaslighting is subtle and confusing, where the gaslighter needs 'to appear reasonable and "good", but who was nonetheless deeply committed to getting his own way' (p.21). The third is the more overt 'intimidator gaslighter' who makes every effort to 'demean and devalue' the target.

Stern asserts that gaslighting can take hold in three stages. The first stage is 'disbelief' of the claims/behaviour of the gaslighter. This refers to when the gaslighter begins to derail the gaslighter. These can be minor subtle behaviours, comments or once off attacks on the gaslightee to undermine their reality. The gaslightee responds with disbelief that the gaslighting occurred and minimises the event. Stern's stage two is when the gaslightee begins to consider the gaslighter's perspective as truth and starts to lose touch with their own sense of reality and ability to make judgements. They move into 'defence' where they are invested in defending their behaviour or position to convince the gaslighter to see value in them and judge them accurately. The third stage described by Stern is 'depression'. This is where the gaslightee feels defeated. They lose hope of convincing the

gaslighter of their own reality and adopt the gaslighters reality and perspective. Stern states that gaslightee's can remove themselves from gaslighting relationships by recognising the gaslighting, maintaining connection to ones 'sense of self' and perceptions and leaving gaslighting relationships that have no hope for change.

Whist Stern focusses on the interpersonal realm of gaslighting within her book, she makes brief acknowledgement that there is a culture of gaslighting. She describes political tactics, pressures of schooling achievement and advertising as the example. She states that the culture of gaslighting 'bombards' people with a sense of reality attuned to what is being marketed rather than the consumer experiencing their own wants and desires.

Like Stern, Abramson (2014) writes from a psychoanalytical approach within her article. She is coming from a philosophical background and aims to highlight what is 'wrong' with gaslighting another person. She highlights the 'structure of gaslighting interactions' by understanding ways that gaslighting is used to manipulate others (p.2). Abramson posits gaslighting as

'a form of emotional manipulation in which the gaslighter tries (consciously or not) to induce in someone the sense that her reactions, perceptions, memories and/or beliefs are not just mistaken, but utterly without grounds – paradigmatically, so unfounded as to qualify as crazy' (p. 2).

Further the gaslighter denies that there is anything 'worth being upset about' producing a radical minimalization or reconceptualisation of an incidents harm with the intention of undermining another's right to 'protest bad conduct' (p. 6). Abramson argues that

gaslighting has its effect when it occurs by 'multiple incidents' over a long period of time and that often it can involve 'multiple parties' gaslighting or cooperating with the gaslighter, isolating the target (p.3). She states that gaslighters may or may not have 'morally dark underlying aims' (p. 8). Morally dark aims include the destruction or 'obliteration of another's' 'independent perspective and moral standing', (p. 12) manipulation, a 'deep failure of recognition respect', torture, epistemic injustice, and silencing (p. 18). The target of gaslighting according to Abramson, is left unable to judge if they are wrong or mistaken and substitute the gaslighters judgement for their own. This can impact on their 'rational competence' and ability to evaluate and respond to events and situations as they arise meaning they are also no longer able to 'rationally consent' (p.16). Further the credibility of the target becomes redundant as there is no longer 'credibility to be assessed' (p.17).

Abramson argues that psychologically, gaslighters possess the 'inability to tolerate even the possibility of challenge' or disagreement (p.9). Gaslighting plays out within the interpersonal domain when a gaslighter needs the target to see the world their way, undermining them to the point where the target cannot challenge them (p.10). The 'gaslighter *wholeheartedly, constantly, and consistently* aims at the destruction [of the] targets standing to issue challenges' (emphasis theirs, p11). To do this, gaslighters make 'proclamations', 'declarations' and 'directives' to their target such as 'you're crazy' rather than inviting discussion on an issue. They can move to 're-entrenching dismissals' where any questioning of the directive or further evidence against the directive is continually dismissed (p. 14). Gaslighters will use 'manipulative leverage' which can relate to using social and structural inequities and involves 'rationalizing fantasies of *justified* authority' through the covert assertion of power or a threat (emphasis theirs p. 15). A gaslighter can use their position of authority or social standing where the use of 'multiple voices' of gaslighting can

create a 'normalising' effect of the gaslighting and targets self-doubt. The multiple voices are the gaslighters recruitment of other people, structures or institutions to support their gaslighting of the target.

Graves and Samp (2021) also focus on the interpersonal aspect of gaslighting. Their study, based within social psychology, looked at the relationship between power dynamics within participants interpersonal relationships and the presence of gaslighting. They argue gaslighting is a 'tacit form of control' rather than an overt display of dominance meaning gaslighters can 'exert power without overt expression' (p.3384). Their 'concept of dependence power' relates to the 'influence derived from one relational partners reliance on one other' (p.3380). They argue that within a gaslighting relationship, the 'gaslightee' comes to depend on the gaslighter for approval while their 'sense making resources' decrease. The authors found that gaslighting was prominent between partners within romantic relationships that had power differentials rather than a more equal power balance. They attribute this to the partner with low power, having high dependence and reliance on the other partner. This 'dependence is the resource gaslighters exploit to gain and maintain control' (p.3384). Further, they argue that if the lower powered partner, gaslights the high-powered partner, it is to regain some sense of their own reality and 'relieve' the psychological effects of ongoing gaslighting from a high-powered partner (p.3384).

Spear (2019) begins to broaden the focus of interpersonal gaslighting to include epistemic dimensions. Spear is writing from a philosophical perspective building upon

Abramson's (2014) argument. Whilst Spear agrees with much that Abramson argues as the manipulative functions of gaslighting, he disagrees with her minimising of the epistemic dimensions to gaslighting. He argues that epistemic factors such as epistemic testimony, credibility, evidence, and reasons are also utilised in gaslighting (p.3). Gaslighters can use epistemic reasoning as a tool of gaslighting through a 'tacit claim to a position of epistemic superiority relative to his victim' (p. 1). The gaslighter questions their victims 'epistemic standing' and 'entitlement to epistemic self-trust' (p.2). This questions not only their moral, psychological, and cognitive reliability, but impacting their 'epistemic self-trust' and credibility as 'an independent locus of experience, thought, and judgement' (p.11). Spear argues that this loss of epistemic self-trust by the victim, can only occur because of epistemic factors based on 'epistemic status and trust, not just through interpersonal manipulation (p.8). Further, to be motivated to assent to the gaslighter, the victim must have trust of the epistemic credibility of the gaslighter.

Spear argues that epistemic self-trust is a fundamentally expected epistemic norm and afforded human right. Maintaining one's self-trust as intrinsically valuable, Spear argues is a rational response and basis enough to assert a resistance to gaslighting (p.20). Spear argues that a victim of gaslighting therefore is to 'some degree responsible for this capitulation' to gaslighting by degrading their own self trust (p.20). This forfeiting of self-trust then creates the disagreement between the parties to be about whether the victim has epistemic status, credibility, or cognitive reliability, rather than the issue itself being disputed. The victim must then choose between self-trust of their 'own epistemic agency' or 'trust in the gaslighter as an epistemic peer' or even epistemic authority (p. 12-13).

Spear proposed two conditions of resistance to gaslighting. This included recognising the reasonableness of maintaining epistemic self-trust in the face of gaslighting by 'downgrading her trust in the gaslighter' and recognising the reasoning behind their own self-trust (p. 21). Spear recognises that this is not always possible. The victim may not have the 'option' to do this. The gaslighter may use other manipulative strategies, there may be a power imbalance, the victim may have fragile epistemic self-trust or the social and structural systems at play prevents people or groups from 'having the epistemic self-trust they are rightfully entitled to' (p.21).

Catapang Podosky (2020) builds on the epistemic nature of gaslighting. He takes a philosophical approach 'concerned with the relationship between the concepts used to understand reality and the doubt that gaslighting serves to induce' (p.208). Catapang Podosky sees 'gaslighting as a sociolinguistic phenomenon' (p.209). He argues that gaslighting can take place individually and collectively with a distinction between them as they occur 'at different ontological levels' (p.207). Catapang Podosky aims to 'explain the epistemic effects on subjects of gaslighting, and how this leads to psychological and practical control' (p.208). He proposes there is a 'linguistic order at which a gaslighting exchange takes place' (p.207). First order and second order gaslighting. First order gaslighting is when the gaslighter and their target can hold a shared view of a concept but do not agree that the concept can be applied within certain context (p.208). This form of gaslighting doubts the targets 'interpretative abilities *without* doubting the accuracy of their concepts' (emphasis theirs, p.208). 'Second order gaslighting occurs when there is a disagreement over which concept should be used in a context' (p,208). The 'use of words'

by the gaslighter causes the target to 'doubt their interpretative abilities *in virtue of* doubting the accuracy of their concepts' (emphasis theirs, p.208). Within second order gaslighting, the target questions their own ability and reliability of understanding or interpreting what a particular concept is. In this way it uses 'cognitive and affective elements' to target one's own 'intellectual self-trust' (p. 208).

Catapang Podosky argues that 'intentional gaslighting' has the intention to cause 'hearers to form negative attitudes towards their interpretative abilities' (p.210). Catapang Podosky claims 'unintentional gaslighting' to be when the use of words reflects epistemic factors related to the subject that builds on the epistemic doubt and injustice that already exists for that person. Both forms of gaslighting have the potential to cause another to doubt their own self trust. Catapang Podosky argues that epistemic factors impact this by reflecting the 'unjust' world that gaslighters use to 'undermine one's capacity as an epistemic subject' and can impact the targets to become more 'inclined to downgrade their self-trust in the face of doubt' (p.211). He argues the 'paramount aspect of gaslighting' is that it 'occurs within a system of oppressive patterned behaviour overtime' (p.212). Social environments create 'culturally available information' that 'frames expectations' based 'on tropes, narratives, social meanings, schemas, roles and the like' which are used as tools of gaslighting. That is, the long-standing history of an unjust social positioning can be capitalised on and made 'salient' by gaslighters (p. 212).

Catapang Podosky identifies three distinct 'wrongs' of second order gaslighting. The first is 'metalinguistic deprivation', where the target of gaslighting 'becomes unable to fully participate in discussion about which concept should be expressed by shared words' (p.218). This is argued by Catapang Podosky to be a form of epistemic injustice as it

undermines the target's capacity as a 'knower' and fails to recognise the 'knowledge that marginalized people have to offer' (p.218). It also undermines the interpretation of knowers based on the delegitimising of 'concepts to which they have access' due to their subject position in relation to a given concept or situation (p.218). When people have access as 'speakers' they can participate in the negotiation of the 'concepts that will be expressed by shared words' (p.218). This undermining of the capacity of epistemic subjects can occur individually or as a group. This can take place within the 'production of epistemic resources, such as concepts, to be expressed by words across social spaces' (p.219). Gaslighting can be used to assert psychological and practical control, influencing people to act against their own interests or 'perform actions' they otherwise wouldn't' (p.217).

The second 'wrong' is conceptual obscuration. This involves the target adopting the concept of the gaslighter resulting in the subject losing 'important knowledge about the world, knowledge that is in her best interest to have', further 'undermining people in their capacity as epistemic subjects' (p.221). Gaslighting in this way creates 'psychological control as the gaslighter is able to influence what the subject of gaslighting is able to *know or rationally believe*' (emphasis theirs, p.222). The third wrong, is perspectival subversion. This is where the persistence of the gaslighting of concepts and understandings overtime, renders the subject doubting 'their ability to make conceptual judgements ... [referring] to the conceptual judgement [and perspective] of their gaslighter' (p.223). These insights from Catapang Podosky are valuable in understanding the situation for TGD people who can experience all three of these wrongs through ciscentric trans-erasing gaslighting.

## **Sociology and discourse; the weapons of gaslighting**

This section broadens the domain of gaslighting weaponry from the epistemic and manipulative interpersonal aspects into the mobilisation of discourse that surrounds the target's social and cultural status. This section uses sociology and feminist theory to build upon the knowledge of interpersonal gaslighting.

Sweet (2019) is a sociologist aiming to present a theory of understanding gaslighting by incorporating sociology to further the psychological underpinnings. Sweet argues that interpersonal 'gaslighting should be understood as rooted in social inequalities, including gender, and executed in power laden intimate relationships' (p 851). Heterosexual domestic violence was Sweet's case study to highlight gender inequalities and the prevalence of gaslighting within abusive interpersonal relationships. Sweet, conducted observations of sessions with domestic violence services, interviewed survivors and highlights research on feminist activism.

Sweet contests psychological theory that suggests 'gaslighting takes place in an isolated dyad' arguing that 'gaslighting draws from and exacerbates the gender-based power imbalances present in intimate relationships and in the larger social context' (p.856). She highlights that 'gaslighting depends on some level of intimacy' as the victim cannot easily escape the perpetrator (p.857). Sweet argues 'gaslighting is fundamentally a social phenomenon' as it is the cultural, structural, and institutional constructs that give power to gaslighting (p. 852, p. 854). When gaslighting is used alongside social inequality and power structures it can have 'devastating' consequences, impacting identity, reality, autonomy, and mobility (p. 852). Sweet argues 'gaslighting is rooted in power-laden intimate relationships' and 'abusers mobilize gender-based stereotypes, intersecting inequalities, and

institutional vulnerabilities against victims' (p. 851). This weaponises social inequalities on an interpersonal level whilst eroding realities. It is for these reasons that Sweet argues in (heterosexual) relationships men's use of 'gaslighting' has a different, more systemic impact than women's use of gaslighting towards male partners.

Sweet claims gaslighters capitalise on 'institutional vulnerabilities' to interpersonally isolate people from utilising institutional support. This vulnerability can 'translate into intimate harm' by 'creating unequal conditions in intimate relationships', and vulnerability to abuse (p.865). Sweet asserts that though gaslighting is used to describe interpersonal and political manipulation that creates a sense of surrealism, distortion, and confusion (p.853), she attests that gaslighting can only take effect within interpersonal relationships, insisting that 'the public has too much collective power to experience gaslighting' (p.870). According to Sweet, this is because the collective can push back with the counter narratives available in the public domain and being able to 'fact check' public assertions of gaslighting.

Stark, (2019) uses feminist theory to write about gaslighting, misogyny and psychological oppression. Stark aims to separate epistemic gaslighting from manipulative gaslighting equating this to a distinction between intentional and unintentional gaslighting. She argues that epistemic gaslighting as 'degrading' ones 'epistemic competence or trustworthiness' via an unconscious bias, and is related to 'social identity' and social power. Manipulative gaslighting according to Stark is a social 'collective phenomenon' and form of 'psychological oppression' which she describes as a 'systemic denial of women's testimony about harms done to them by men' (p.221). She argues this is an intentional misogynistic tactic to assert and maintain the dominance of men. Stark argues that manipulative

gaslighting differs from epistemic gaslighting as it has an intent of control. It undermines the situated 'knower' and their standing as a 'moral equal'. Manipulative gaslighting is aimed at discrediting someone regardless of their 'social identity', and not just as a 'response to testimony' as epistemic gaslighting is considered.

Stark argues gaslighting happens firstly, by the sidestepping of evidence. This involves refusing the account of the target, ridicule or belittling tactics, claiming someone is hypocritical, verbal attacks, and 'changing the subject' (p.227). Secondly by 'displacement'. Displacement is achieved by undermining the credibility of the target by attributing the issue as their flaw, meaning that they must 'explain' themselves. This can be achieved by making claims about the target to undermine their right to protest. Further, the gaslighter can portray themselves as the victim of the target.

Stark argues that misogynistic gaslighting is a 'collective phenomenon' and therefore causes psychological injuries within women's collective experiences regardless of whether gaslighting is occurring within interpersonal relationships (p.232). 'Misogynist hostility' is delivered by people towards women when there are sociocultural practices underpinned by misogyny. This creates a 'threat to all women' individually and collectively (p. 232). This misogynistic gaslighting reinforces patriarchal norms, allowing men to inflict injury without consequence, in a way that further 'emboldens' them to commit and consolidate power through injuring and then gaslighting women (p.232). Further, the public misogynistic gaslighting of women plays out interpersonally where women can lose the perspective to trust their judgement within interpersonal relationships with men.

## Systemic and structural gaslighting

This section highlights the way gaslighting has been written about that account for the systemic use of gaslighting to enforce colonialism, white supremacy, and heteronormativity. Davis and Ernst (2019) use race theory as political scientists to discuss the concept of racial gaslighting within the US as a tool to uphold white supremacy. They use case studies to illustrate this. They define 'racial gaslighting as *the political, social, economic and cultural process that perpetuate and normalise a white supremacist reality by pathologizing those who resist*' (emphasis theirs, p. 763). Racial 'gaslighting targets *those who resist*' white supremacy (emphasis theirs, p.771). The concept of racial gaslighting is formulated around binaries of normalisation and pathologisation as they are maintained by dominant narratives and 'the ubiquitous nature of white supremacy' making them extremely difficult to combat (p.764). The macro use of racial gaslighting creates the 'stage' for racial gaslighting on a micro level.

This pathologisation relies on the 'production of particular narratives' (p. 763). Racial gaslighting can be enacted through white supremacy with or without awareness by those inflicting it. The authors apply the concepts of racial spectacles to racial gaslighting to describe how racial gaslighting operates. 'Racial spectacles are *narratives that obfuscate the existence of a white supremacist state power structure*' that provide the basis of racial gaslighting (emphasis theirs, p. 763). These are public displays that can be visual, written or spoken word within media that 'that tell a particular story about the dynamics of race' (p.763). Racial spectacles are aimed at creating racial tension and friction 'in the maintenance of white supremacy' (p763).

Davis and Ernst, argue that white people who support People of Colour's human rights are seen as 'traitors to their race' and as a threat and are used 'symbolically' to warn other white people to maintain white supremacy (p.767). White people can be punished, ignored, labelled as obsessive, dangerous, or crazy. The impact of racial gaslighting can cause People of Colour to lose their lives, their families, their sense of self and wellbeing. They can be pathologised, punished, ridiculed, with the projection of 'racial stereotypes on the whole group' (p. 771). This along with being subjected to the effects of systemic, institutional, and interpersonal racism where the suffering is invisible. Davis and Ernst suggest there are ways to offset racial gaslighting. The use of counter narratives and 'naming and clarifying' when racial gaslighting is occurring supports the dismantling of its power (p.771).

Ruiz (2020) coming from a philosophical perspective, uses a case study of 'women of colour and Indigenous women on Turtle Island (North America)', to build on Davis and Ernst identification of racial gaslighting and racial spectacles (p.687). Ruiz identifies and describes 'cultural gaslighting'. She does this by framing the social power utilised by settler colonies to inflict 'systemic patterns of mental abuse against women of colour and Indigenous women on Turtle Island (North America)' (p. 687). Ruiz asserts that historical violence set the scene for the ongoing violence that is displayed and enacted within language and meaning. She argues that the origins of 'dominant social histories that are maintained through social power', 'distribute, reproduce, and automate social inequalities' (p.704, p.705). Gaslighting occurs to prevent structural change to the systemic undercurrent of oppression and violence. Cultural gaslighting is not enacted by individuals but rather as a system that works

from the bottom up where agents maintaining the gaslighting approach are rewarded and granted status by doing so. Gaslighting creates an 'epistemic territory' for 'dominant communities to claim epistemic space as their own, and only their own' (p.703).

Ruiz argues that gaslighting is a 'structural phenomenon that upholds interpersonal; and institutional modes of mental abuse in settler colonies' (p.688). Along with Davis and Ernst, Ruiz argues that gaslighting occurs as a response to resistance to dominant colonial culture. Oppressed peoples are devalued, their testimony silenced through a 'settler innocence narrative'. This is a gaslighting tactic positioning settler colonist's as 'innocent' to racial inequity and therefore unable to take responsibility (p.688,p.689). The positioning of gaslighting as only interpersonal, Ruiz argues, is a nonaccidental form of settler innocence narrative keeping oppressed people 'in the dark' on cultural violence and structural versions of the manipulative tactic of gaslighting. Ruiz states the harms occurring through interpersonal violence are occurring structurally towards specific groups of people. This means the 'effort of one culture to undermine another culture's confidence and stability by causing the victimized collective to doubt [it's] own sense and beliefs' creates the effect of cultural gaslighting (p.689). This is 'functionalised' through 'networks of settler institutions, social policies and publicly licenced resources of interpretation' (p.689).

Among these 'resources of interpretation', Ruiz highlights 'medical gaslighting'. This is the 'interpersonal phenomenon of having one's experience of illness marginalised' which includes oppressed people's having their 'self-reported or presenting symptoms downplayed, silenced or psychologically manipulated' by health and clinical professionals (p.689). Ruiz further asserts that this occurs 'not by accident, but by design' creating gaps in research, policy, training, institutional procedures, advisory boards, medical knowledge for

oppressed groups of people (p. 689, 691). Ruiz refers to this as 'structured inattention' to racism, white supremacy, and misogyny as a form of gaslighting that creates and perpetuates health inequality. Ruiz argues that the pathological narrative applied to resisters of white supremacy along with 'cultural intent' situates gaslighting as a 'settler epistemic tool' to silence 'critical analysis of settler structural violence' allowing the 'continuing project of dispossession' by mitigating 'cultural liability' (p.695).

Ruiz argues that dispossession, colonialism, settler innocence, and exploitation of epistemic and emotional labour of the oppressed are forms of violence that make gaslighting possible. Ruiz highlights the epistemic injustice when the speaker's testimony is undermined and is portrayed as unreliable. Arguing that within settler colonial culture [one group] is '*always tactically positioned as the Hearer*' (emphasis theirs, p. 700). It is the hearer who can raise the doubts of the reliability of the perception and interpretations by the speaker. Meaning dominance and hierarchy is created by the 'hearer' positioned in control of what gets to be said.

Gaslighting as a weapon of a dominant culture as discussed by Davis and Ernst and Ruiz, extends to a tool of dominance against the queer community. Wozolek (2018) discusses gaslighting in the context of heteronormative dominance. Her aim is to describe gaslighting as a part of an 'assemblage of violence' which refers to the many ways violence is deployed against marginalised groups. She has taken an autoethnographic approach writing about her time as a queer schoolteacher of colour in 2010 in an 'overwhelmingly white, straight, cisgendered school in the Midwest' (USA) (p.320). Wozolek set up a Genders and Sexualities Alliance at the high school where she worked. She provides an account of

her experience and the events that occurred demonstrating gaslighting from the school leaders and fellow teachers. This would include not passing information on to Wozolek, undermining and mockery of LGBTIQ groups and events, claiming Wozolek's involvement in situations she had no knowledge of, and 'twisting' the truth of matters.

Wozolek frames gaslighting as a 'form of oppression that explicitly and implicitly punishes queerness' (p.320). Gaslighting sits within a socio-political and cultural context (p. 325) and is used as an 'oppressive tool' marginalising people and groups in normalised homophobic ways forcing the 'victim to question her sanity' (p. 322, p. 332). Wozolek argues that gaslighting should be named outright and included as a form of violence and hatred towards queerness based on the maintenance of the 'cis-heteropatriarchy'. Wozolek argues the systemic oppression that underpins gaslighting is fuelled by 'connections between beings, bodies, and sociocultural norms and values' (p.322), where the iterations of violence are 'dependant on sociocultural norms, histories, and acts of violence' (p.334). Wozolek refers to gaslighting as framed within an assemblage of violence that is based on narratives and can affect a person's 'way of being and knowing' (p.322, p.333). Those who are 'othered' within normalised systems of being can experience the assemblages of violence. Wozolek argues that 'subtle forms of racism, sexism, homophobia, or transphobia can be understood as a form of oppression and sociocultural gaslighting' (p.333).

Pohlhaus (2020) writes from a philosophical feminist theory perspective. She aims to expand on existing understandings of epistemic gaslighting to include the structural and institutional environment that function on their own to enact epistemic gaslighting. The structural resources themselves are epistemically gaslighting. It is here where

‘nondominantly situated persons are continually called upon to centre the experience of those who are dominantly situated even when (and perhaps especially when) their own experiences come into conflict with it’ (p. 680). Epistemic gaslighting pushes the nondominant knower away from their own sense of self intelligibility. ‘Epistemic echoing’ is where ‘beliefs become amplified through repetition and circulation’ (p. 681). It is this echoing that makes epistemic gaslighting possible.

Pohlhus states that resistance by non-dominant situated knowers who disengage from oppressive structures can be gaslighted to be irrational, unreasonable, or difficult. Pohlhaus argues this gaslighting minimises or erases ‘serious and important epistemic labour’ (p. 676). The ‘strenuous epistemic labour’ of resistance she refers to is in the form of ‘epistemic disengagement’ from deeply entrenched structural epistemic frameworks that gaslight ‘non dominantly situated knowers’ (p. 675). Pohlhaus argues that for non-dominant knowers to disengage, they need to decentre dominant situated knowledge and ‘attend’ to non-dominantly situated knowers experiences.

### **Gaslighting in the context of the trans and gender diverse community**

This section discusses the scholarship on gaslighting and TGD people. The current research on TGD people experiencing gaslighting discusses the role of allies who gaslight TGD people, including parents as allies. McKinnon (2017) argues for the abandonment of the term ‘ally’ to reframe the term as ‘active bystanders’. She uses a case scenario to highlight the problematic culture of allies. McKinnon defines an ally as a member of a dominant social group, who works for social equity for a marginalised group. She argues that ally’s bad epistemic behaviours’ towards those that they ‘claim to support’ are left

unquestioned (p.167). Her focus is upon allies of TGD people, who gaslight TGD. Claims to being an ally can be used to gaslight the first-person testimony of the epistemically situated knower. This gaslighting can be based on an identity prejudice informed by identity stereotypes (See also Friedlaender & Ivy, 2020).

McKinnon argues a demonstration of emotions by the target will give further reason to victimize a speaker by discounting the credibility of their testimony. This can lead to 'testimonial quietening' where people's testimony is so discredited 'it's as if they never spoke at all' (p.169). The gaslighting behaviours of an ally is privileging their own perception over the testimony of the person they are an ally of. This means that allies can perceive the oppressed minority as not 'suitably objective' to comment on their experience of harassment or experiences. This can be informed by doubting credibility and being 'far too often unwilling to simply trust and accept a marginalised person's testimony at face value: they need to see the harm for themselves' (p.171; See also, Friedlaender & Ivy, 2020).

Epistemic gaslighting is 'often unintentional, where a listener doesn't believe, or expresses doubt about, a speaker's testimony [and in so doing] raises doubts about the speaker's reliability at perceiving events accurately' (McKinnon, 2017, p.168). McKinnon argues against this assumption by allies, claiming that 'the affected person is particularly well epistemically situated to perceive events properly' (p.169). To deny 'first person authority' of the affected person is a 'testimonial injustice'. This also denies the first-person knower the knowledge of their epistemic position within their lives in relationship to themselves, others, and the broader social context. McKinnon argues that this doubting and mistrust of the moral and epistemic authority of the speaker's first person testimony

constitutes gaslighting and acts as a betrayal by undermining the truth of the marginalised situated person especially when social, cultural, or institutional power can be asserted.

Riggs and Bartholomaeus (2018) discuss the gaslighting of TGD people. Riggs works as a psychotherapist specialising in supporting transgender children and their families. The authors use a synopsis of several of Riggs' clients as the basis of three fictional case studies to demonstrate how gaslighting can occur. They identify gaslighting in the case of TGD people as an identity related abuse as part of a cisgenderist society. They argue that within the context of cisgenderism, the questioning of transgender people's experiences is considered acceptable (p.384). The authors note that gaslighting in the context of transgender people can include, 'expecting transgender people to explain themselves', 'conflating being transgender with a mental disorder' and treating a transgender people's mental health as the 'real' issue rather than the oppression (p.385). Denying that someone is transgender, or the existence of transgender people gaslighting (see also, Quinn, 2020).

They state that some parents may appear to be supportive but are enacting gaslighting in a subtle form and can be creating a barrier for their child's transition. They highlight the imbedded power differential between parent and child that is a part of the basis where gaslighting can occur as a tool of power and control. This echoes what other authors have said in the case of power relations providing the basis for gaslighting to be operational. If parents position themselves as ally, gaslighting can go unrecognised as it is 'socially supported within the context of cisgenderism' (p.386). The 'narrative of loss' often expressed by parents, describes the social construct that having a child who is transgender constitutes a loss.

The authors note that clinical literature surrounding transgender children involves gaslighting transgender people and is 'complicit in making [gaslighting] seem acceptable' (p.387). Riggs and Bartholomaeus note three main areas where gaslighting occurs from parents to their children. First is deferring action by preventing the child from progressing with their social and medical transition. Secondly, 'intentional forgetting' involves missing appointments, especially those required in a timely manner such as endocrinology appointments for puberty blockers. Thirdly placing the 'emotional burden on children' by misgendering, mispronouncing or using the narrative of loss, and 'passing off their lack of action as arising from the child's purportedly unreasonable demands' (p.390).

Gaslighting is becoming more broadly considered as a tactic of power and abuse that is underpinned by social and institutional inequality and hierarchies and not just an isolated interpersonal weapon of abuse (Ernst & Davis, Ruiz, Stark, 2019; Sweet, 2019). Gaslighting can enact 'testimonial injustice' where the person's testimony is discredited and silenced based on identity prejudice (McKinnon, 2017; Riggs & Bartholomaeus, 2018). Gaslighting operates in many ways. It can be both intentional and unintentional. Second order gaslighting occurs when the gaslighter and target disagree on a concept. This could occur perhaps concurrently with metalinguistic deprivation, where the gaslighter undermines and discredits the target's ability to contribute to the formation of concepts. Gaslighters position themselves as knowers, speakers and hearers. This is while they are not able to handle challenge or disagreement along with a need to be right. This leads to their need to destroy the target's epistemic standing, credibility, sense of self and identity to assert dominance and power minimising the target's ability to challenge them. The literature describes how

gaslighting works to undermine non-dominantly positioned knowers. It can have devastating effects on people and collectives. This is in the form of impacting a person's self-trust, their access to epistemic knowledge and resources, and the devastating impacts of colonialism, white supremacy, and heteronormativity. Allies are also targets of gaslighting. Whilst the literature touches on the gaslighting of TGD people, it is brief and focusses mostly on allies of TGD people. My research will address this as an important contribution to the knowledge of how gaslighting operates against TGD people.

### **Chapter three: TGD pregnancy, childbirth, and lactation discourse.**

The public comment in this case study was in response to TGD people's inclusion and participation in pregnancy, childbirth, lactation, and parenting. This chapter explores the literature concerning this. The articles discuss themes of repronormativity, intelligibility, sterility, transnormativity and heteronormativity. This review is organised chronologically to highlight how themes have evolved and been built upon within the literature over time.

Ryan (2009) writes about trans men and parenthood within a chapter from her book is amongst some of the first academic writings to discuss TGD people and pregnancy. Ryan conducted interviews with 10 trans masculine people who were either parents or planning to become parents. Ryan refers to Thomas Beatie, a trans man who in 2008 was interviewed on various high profile television shows and within magazines, as he was pregnant at the time. Media sensationalism and tabloid-style exploitation (see also Pearce & White, 2019) of Beatie followed. This media response had conflated his participating in pregnancy, which is traditionally and typically considered a woman's domain, with being 'female'. Ryan argues that the visibility of Beatie, whilst locating his body within the female, opened a 'new social category' of male pregnancy while challenging and rethinking the complexity of 'what it means to be a father' (p.139). Ryan argues that for TGD people 'parenting identities are situated within experiences of transphobia' (p.140). This is coupled with a 'cocktail of gendered assumptions [along with] gender oppression' (p.141). Ryan argues that understanding TGD parenting can bring unique insights and 'offer a particular lens for viewing the world, parenting, gender, fatherhood, gender equality, and children's gender choices' (p.141).

Ryan asserts that TGD parents face 'structural and ideological barriers' (p.141). This includes facing gendered parenting assumptions, transphobia, and heterosexism. The invisibility of TGD parents within the 'cultural imagination', means a 'lack of social scripts' to bring familiarity and recognition, denying a TGD persons right to parenthood (p.142). Ryan found that when a TGD person had not undertaken medical transition, they would be assumed to be a mother even when they saw themselves as fathers or parents (see also Pearce & White, 2019). Although pregnancy is conflated with feminine, Ryan reports that trans men undertaking pregnancy, 'conceptualised themselves as men who had the unique opportunity to be pregnant' (p.145). The participants stated they 'do fathering differently' because of their trans experiences. This can be through minimising the gendering of children and being able to parent without scripted roles, unconstrained by 'conventional definitions of what it means to be a father' (p.148).

Karaian, (2013) discussed several legal cases from the US, UK, Canada, and NZ spanning from 1974 to 2003. The cases were regarding TGD people and sex, gender, reproduction, and parenting. Karaian uses these cases with the aim to recreate meanings of how TGD people hold conception and pregnancy within their imaginary. Karaian shows repronormativity and its assumptions, underpin trans masculine reproductive experiences. Like Ryan (2009), they note that reproductive and biological discourse 'materialize and maternalize female identity' (p.211) remains, naturalising 'pregnancy as a uniquely female experience' (p.226). This discourse positions pregnant men and non-binary people as really 'women'. Pregnant men and non-binary people 'embody "incoherence"' when understood through the cisnormative concept of a 'man who is a mother' (p. 217). However, Karaian

argues that pregnant men 'unsex' parenting and reproduction by reimagining dominant sociocultural, 'epistemological, and ontological understandings of sex' (p.212). They highlight the impacts of repronormativity in determining legal sex and the impacts of this discourse on reproductive rights for trans people (see also Bartholomaeus & Riggs, 2020). Karaian seeks to dismantle the 'naturalised truth' of the biological determinism of sex, gender and identity for parents and instead highlight parenting as richly complex and 'resistant to all simplistic reductionism' (p.214).

The notion that a TGD person has been born into the 'wrong body', informs transnormativity and often leads to the practice of 'changing sex' surgically. This can result in sterility and an inability to reproduce biological children. Karaian observes that, a trans person can be considered to have an 'incomplete sex' if unable to procreate in the way a materialised gendered person is assumed to be able to. This places the trans body outside of procreation, as an infertile, 'incomplete' version of their 'true' gender as they forfeit their ability to procreate within their assigned gender to transition.

Riggs (2014) conducted an iterative analysis of the interview Oprah Winfrey had with Thomas Beatie (see Ryan, 2009) in 2008 on The Oprah Winfrey Show. Riggs focuses on how Winfrey engaged with Beatie, which he argues demonstrated and contributed to the ongoing marginalisation of trans men. According to Riggs, Winfrey was unable to understand 'Beatie as a man on his own terms' and used what Riggs has termed 'mundane transphobia' to express this (p.161). Riggs describes mundane transphobia as the everyday, yet still violent, discrimination and normative assumptions made towards trans people 'under the guise of humour or claims to liberalism' (p.158). Mundane transphobia is when

‘normative assumptions are made that makes heterosexism and transphobia both speakable and difficult to challenge’ (p.159). Riggs argues it is this mundane transphobia that can render trans people marginalised and unintelligible. The debate and discussion within the interview identified by Riggs was the contested spaces of whether Beatie was a man who was pregnant, or if being pregnant questioned his status as a man. Riggs argues that a TGD person can identify as a man, but with a history of normative and natal femaleness/womanhood, they cannot be comprehended socioculturally as a man who is pregnant (p 164).

Riggs identifies two themes that emerged from the interview. The first is the focus on aetiology (‘natal sex’) to understand a TGD person and the second, the normative understanding of masculinity. This is formulated in efforts to create an intelligibility of a TGD person. Focussing in on ‘natal sex’ positions the TGD persons origin as where they ‘naturally’ are placed (see also Walls, Kattari & DeChants, 2018). Locating someone within a normative gender experience creates intelligibility and when a person does not follow the normative pathway of gender, they are rendered unintelligible (see also Riggs, Pfeffer, Pearce, Hines, & Ray, 2021). ‘Wrong body’ discourse is a cisnormative understanding applied to the trans body as an attempt at making the trans body intelligible. A pregnant trans man therefore defies the logic of a wrong body and cisnormative discourse rendering the pregnant trans man more unintelligible.

Riggs highlights that a TGD person who is pregnant, soon to be a parent, will sit under the medical and psychiatric gaze. This leaves TGD parents susceptible to the effects of this gaze on their autonomy and what is acceptable parenting (see also, Riggs et al., 2020). Riggs argues that Beatie even wanting to be pregnant and carry a child suggests Beatie is not

adhering to the social construction of masculinity and is seen to fail at being a man. Riggs argues that this failure is pointed at Beatie rather than the norms themselves.

von Doussa, Power and Riggs, (2015) discuss TGD peoples navigating of parenting. They do this by conducting a qualitative study through in-depth interviews of 13 transgender adults in Australia. Participants were both parents and non-parents, describing their 'thoughts and experiences about family, relationships, and parenting' (p.1119). This with the aim to understand 'what transgender people imagine is possible for them with respect to parenthood' (p.1200). They found that the culture within the profession of medicine can 'withhold reproductive opportunities' for TGD people (see also, Bartholomaeus & Riggs, 2020; Karaian, 2013).

The authors state that socioculturally there is less acceptance of parents who deviate from heteronormative cisgendered assumptions of parenting. With the cultural push for medical/surgical inflicted infertility to transition, the social cultural belief is that when a TGD person seeks to 'become male' they forfeit the right to become pregnant (see also, Bartholomaeus & Riggs, 2020; Obedin-Maliver & Makadon, 2016; Walls, Kattari & DeChants, 2018). This sits alongside a socio-political 'deep suspicion about the parenting rights and capacities of transgender people' (p.1120). Parenting is 'culturally constructed in highly gendered terms' meaning transgender parents need to creatively negotiate the 'complex interaction between a parenting identity and a transgender identity' (p.1120; See also Obedin-Maliver & Makadon, 2016).

von Doussa et al. noted that for some trans people parenting felt unattainable. This perception included the imaginary of what constitutes the role of a 'real' woman or man in

the context of reproduction, gender, and family. These ideas create the challenge of negotiating the medical, cisgender, and heteronormative gaze whilst incorporating a parenting identity with a transgender identity. This gaze can and does hinder some TGD people pursuing gender identity decisions (See also Bartholomaeus & Riggs, 2020; Obedin-Maliver & Makadon, 2016). This gaze fuels the sociocultural attitude that questions the desire of 'motherhood' residing within someone who does not 'see themselves as a woman' (p.1128). At the same time, the authors note that non-conventional reproduction, parenting, and family is becoming more possible, which allows people to have more 'capacity to define their individual life courses' (p. 1127).

Walks (2017) article focusses on the experiences and invisibility of queer/masculine chestfeeding/breastfeeding (p.128). She draws on queer and feminist theory through Butler's gender performativity and Halberstam's 'female masculinity' to position her argument (p.130). Walks discusses the case of trans man Trevor McDonalds successful bid to the La Leche League International (LLL), a breastfeeding peer support group, to become a group leader. Walks couples this case with their own research into 'butch lesbians', trans men's, and genderqueer individuals' experiences of pregnancy and infertility' (p.127).

People who breastfeed can be stigmatised if they are masculine presenting whilst breastfeeding (see also MacDonald et al., 2016). Walks argues pregnancy and breast/chestfeeding are socioculturally 'recognized solely as feminine' and tied up within the 'production of culture' and performance of gender whilst breastfeeding (p.133, p.136). Walks notes that 'breastfeeding is distinctly associated with femaleness and femininity' (p.127) (see also Pearce & White, 2019).

The association of femaleness to transmasculine bodies as a consistent theme in the literature is discussed further by Toze (2018) through the lens of feminist theory. Toze (2018) through an analytic autoethnographic approach, used their own experiences to discuss the forced sterilisation of trans people as a legal requirement for those who wish to change their gender marker in Europe and the UK. Toze asserts the biology of possessing a womb is medically and culturally considered as being 'risky' for a person's health and wellbeing. This leads to an encouragement of trans masculine people to undergo hysterectomies and the removal of ovaries, based on 'medical' grounds. Toze asserts this medical intervention to 'fix' a 'female' bodies follows cultural and socio-political and cultural assumptions along with a 'strong taboo against the pregnant man' (p.194).

Toze argues that coding trans masculine bodies as female is inauthentic and perpetuates binary oppositions and heteronormativity. They assert that trans experiences are located within a wider system of gender hierarchy. Toze states that 'there are links between ways in which female bodies and trans masculine bodies have been subjected to medical intervention' (p.197). Toze highlights the assumption that trans masculine people are risking their reproductive health by taking hormones (see also Riggs et al., 2020). Thus, the 'solution' is surgical removal to lower the inherent 'risk' of 'female' reproductive organs (see also Obedin-Maliver & Makadon, 2016). This both regulates and medicalises trans bodies. Along with this is the heteronormative social cultural response that the using of reproductive organs by a trans masculine person for childbirth and feeding appears confusing and counter intuitive. This leads to an assumption that trans masculine people cannot or will not undertake pregnancy (see also, Bartholomaeus & Riggs, 2020).

Toze argues 'reproductive ability is strongly associated with social constructions of whether a body should be considered male or female' (p.201). With medical and sociocultural assumption 'that [a] "true" trans man would never seek to become pregnant' (see also Walls, Kattari & DeChants, 2018) along with trans masculine pregnancy being considered 'risky, undesirable and unrecognised' (p.205). Further when coupled with the notion of the child requiring a cisgendered heteronormative mother and father, a transmasculine parent can be positioned 'as shocking, dangerous or simply unthinkable' (p.204).

Averette (2021) also draws on feminist theory and queer theory arguing that the essentialism of motherhood is reinforced through feminist theory. Averette calls for an 'interrogation' of the 'naturalisation of sex through understandings of the female body as capable of mothering' (p. 289). Averette argues that a focus on LGBTQ parenting will de-essentialise 'motherhood and maternal embodiment' (p.292). They use two case studies from their PhD dissertation on LGBTQ parents and the gender socialisation of their children (p.293). Their case study provides examples of how LGBTQ parenting in general, and especially that of LGBTQ parents of colour, counter gender embodiment and motherhood. She argues for the decentring of heteronormative, cisnormative and nuclear family models as crucial to de-essentialise motherhood. Averette argues that mothering or fathering roles cannot be assumed based on a person's social, legal, or personal gender identity with LGBTQ parents are 'rewriting the rules' (p.297-298) (see also Walls, Kattari & DeChants, 2018).

The literature demonstrates that undertaking pregnancy, childbirth and lactation is constructed socially, culturally, structurally and within medical and legal institutions as a feminized and female experience with underpinning's of biological determinism and repronormativity. This aligns the TGD person with femaleness. Transnormativity informs the idea of 'changing sex' leads to coercive or assumed sterility creating the narrative that TGD people forfeit their right to procreate if they chose to transition. Further TGD people who undertake pregnancy face the assumption that a 'real' man wouldn't want to be pregnant. It was noted that a contestation of repronormativity and gendered parenting roles exists within LGBTIQ parenting. Trans, queer and feminist is working to de-essentialise these roles. The experiences and recognition of TGD people as parents opens the scope of how parenting is understood is also creating new identities of parents.

## Chapter four: Public comment and TGD discourse

My literature reviews focussed on gaslighting and TGD reproductive discourse as this is the scope of this thesis. There is literature on broader media representation of TGD people available (Kerry, 2018; Lovelock, 2017; McIntyre, 2017; Riggs, 2014). As I am focussing on analysing the TGD people and reproduction themes along with gaslighting within the public comment as representative of broader societal views, this literature was not included for review. I do want to acknowledge Richardson-Self work again here as her research and analysis of online public comment uncovered similar themes that I will build upon. This includes themes that she terms as 'purely affective responses', 'explicit dimorphic-sex commitment', 'slippery slope', 'sex-segregated spaces' and commenters using phrases that contain themes of 'crazy', 'disbelief' and 'stupidity' (p.303).

This chapter is a discourse analysis of themes present in the online public comment made in response to news articles about the Gender Inclusive Handbook recommendations from the ANU related to TGD people and reproduction. The comments I discuss have been taken from the comments section from online news articles. I begin by naming the online articles that were written as responses to the ANU recommendations. This will bring context to the analysis and discussion of the public comments that will follow. There were eight articles that I accessed online for this case study. Seven of these articles were published through News Corp and one was independently owned. Six articles were comment on the ANU recommendations. One was a rebuttal from the ANU to the articles. The remaining one was reporting on a bill in the Senate presented by Pauline Hanson to outlaw gender neutral terminology and the term chestfeeding. The articles were two, to four-minute reads. The language used within the articles at times was hostile, degrading and misrepresenting of

facts. Some articles did try to show neutrality and present both sides. The articles' focus, and framing was reflected in the focus and framing of the public comment corresponding to that article. There were however consistent themes throughout each set of comments regardless of the original tone of the article.

Christopher Harris's first article (Harris a), was accessed in the *Daily Telegraph*, located behind a paywall. It was written on February 16<sup>th</sup> 2021. This article was titled 'ANU to drop "mother" and "father" in bid for gender inclusive education; The nations top university has told staff to stop using words like mother in favour of "gestational parent" and to call fathers the "non birthing parent"'. This article received 1347 public comments. His second article (Harris b) was written on 17<sup>th</sup> February, also in the *Daily Telegraph*, located behind a paywall. This article is titled 'Education minister condemns "woke rubbish" in Aussie unis after ANU language drama; Federal Education Minister says he refers to himself as a "proud father", not a "non-gestational" parent as the authors of [ANU's] university's teaching guidebook would like'. This article received 127 comments.

Frank Chung wrote two articles the first (Chung a) was published on February 16<sup>th</sup>, 2021, in *news.com.au*. It was titled 'ANU urges staff to say 'chestfeeding' instead of 'breastfeeding', 'gestational parent' instead of mother; The country's leading university has asked staff to adopt "gender-inclusive" parenting language such as "chestfeeding" and "human milk"'. This article received 881 comments. Chung's second article (Chung b) was written on the 18<sup>th</sup> of March, also in *news.com.au*. This article was titled, 'Senate votes to ban 'distorted' gender-neutral language such as 'chestfeeding' from official materials; A [Green's] Senator has reacted with fury after the Morrison government sided with One Nation to pass a "bigoted, disgusting" motion'. This article received 505 comments.

Louise Roberts published an article on the 16<sup>th</sup> of February for the *Daily Telegraph*, located behind a paywall. This was titled 'You can keep your 'chest feeding' and other ridiculous PC language; The latest push for politically correct and gender-neutral language has at its roots a sinister attempt to control people's thoughts and replace family with government'. This article received 57 comments.

Rebecca Baker wrote for the *Sunday Mail* on February 21<sup>st</sup> 2021, located behind a paywall. Her article was titled, 'Why being told how to speak irks us: Adelaide linguist unpacks the reaction to 'gestational parent'. An SA linguist says those upset by a uni's new guide on how to describe mothers and fathers should expect to see new changes'. This article highlighted a poll indicating that 99% of people who polled disagreed with the recommendations. This article received 42 comments.

Adelaide Now journalist Kara Jung published a piece on 16<sup>th</sup> February 2021 in *The Advertiser*, located behind a paywall. This was titled 'ANU's gender handbook suggestion to drop mother, father is utter crap; Asking people to dump words like mum, dad and breastfeeding is the mother of all insults'. This article gathered 206 comments.

Fiona Jenkins, as a co-writer of the recommendations, wrote the only independently published article. This was as a rebuttal to the other articles. This was written on the 24<sup>th</sup> February 2021 in the *Canberra Times*, titled, 'No, ANU is not getting rid of mums and dads'. This article received 8 comments. None were supportive, but rather expressed the same themes as the other articles.

When analysing the comments made by the Australian public in response to these articles, several themes emerged. The themes I will discuss include science and nature, 'real man' discourse, TGD people as parents, erasure of cis people, ownership of public space, and nationalism along with Australian parenting values. This chapter will describe these themes and discuss how they were observed, by highlighting and analysing specific comments, sentences or words used. When referencing the comments, I will note the commenters name, then the author of the corresponding online news article that the comment was extracted from. Comments occurred on a spectrum of intensity or harm. Some demonstrated confusion or a simplifying of the situation with many demonstrating outright hostility and hatred. Of the over 2000 comments I read, there were only five comments that I noted showing support of the recommendations and TGD community. Their comments did however receive rebuttal and argument from other commenters.

## **Science and nature**

*'Nature isn't always politically correct'* (Harris b, commentator 1).

Reference to science, nature and biological essentialism was a common theme within the commentary. This theme was used to assert repronormativity. These comments claimed that the inclusion of TGD people within pregnancy, lactation and childbirth ignores the 'science', and 'blurs' the differences between 'male' and 'female'. According to many, the recommendations are 'denying human biology' (Chung a, commentator 1). *'Females are the only gender who can conceive, carry and give birth'* (Harris a, commentator 1). This comment assumes that to possess a uterus means a person is female bodied aligning to discourse that pregnant TGD people are 'really women', locating TGD people who give birth

as 'female' (Karaian, 2017; Riggs, 2014; Toze, 2018). The following comment built upon this by equating the role of lactation with a female coded body only (Walks, 2017). '*[M]en have chests, women have breasts and they are for breastfeeding babies, something men cannot do.*' (Harris a, commentator 2). These statements prescribe what role in procreation a TGD person is expected to occupy. That is reproductive ability is correlated with the assigned male or female 'ness' of the body (Toze, 2018).

The discourse of nature defining what is considered socially appropriate featured within comments. '*Gender neutral language distorts and maligns what the Sacredness of Nature has revealed between a Woman and a Man in the creation of their offspring*' (Chung b, commentator 1). Here the commenter is relating gender to the sacredness of nature. According to this commentator, TGD people having children defies and '*distorts*' nature. The reference to the animal kingdom was another way this discourse operated. One comment stated, '*you were born male or female, the same as most species on this earth*' (Chung b, commentator 2). Further what is considered natural was conflated with what is normal. '*Its aim is to make us accept abnormal behaviour as normal and unnatural behaviour as natural and redefine us as something other than what we are*' (Chung a, commentator 2).

### **'Real' man discourse**

*'Seriously? Why the hell would a man feel that they have to be included as such in breastfeeding?'* (Chung a, commentator 3).

Transnormativity and 'real man' discourse was located within several comments (Karaian, 2013; Riggs, 2014; Toze, 2018; von Doussa et al., 2015). These comments declared

that certain body parts and functions denote a person's gender identity. '*[M]en don't breast feed and so a breast/chestfeeding person must be a woman*' (Harris a, commentator 3).

These assumptions, fuel the notion that a real man does not have mammary glands or lactate. This aligns TGD people with a normative idea of how the body continues to be coercively assigned a 'natal' sex regardless of the embodied experience of the TGD person.

*'It's because transgender males want it all, the perks of a female but be treated as a male and yes giving birth it's a perk only for females.'* (Chung b, Commentator 3). This comment suggests that a trans man should forfeit his right to reproductive freedom and fertility if he socially and/or medically transitions. It also describes a narrative that TGD people 'want it all' the best of both gendered worlds. Here giving birth is considered a female only '*perk*' that TGD males should lose access to if they transition. Along with this was a denial that TGD people should be entering the ciswoman's space of childbirth, pregnancy, and lactation. A space where reproductive organs and secondary sex characteristics are being used. '*People who, if they undergo sexual reassignment surgery, cannot biologically become a parent.'* (Chung a, Commentator 4). These comments reflect this confusion and the idea that the true TGD person would never want to become pregnant, fuelling the coercive assumption of sterility and 'real' man discourse (Karaian, 2013; Toze, 2018; von Doussa et al., 2015).

*'Chest feeding is a joke, it's breastfeeding always will be and I will never get why a transgender male will want to give birth and breastfe[e]d but complain about it, you can't have your way all the time. If you identify as a male fine but why give birth, that[s] especially shock horror for women'* (Chung b, Commentator 4). This comment describes the social rules regarding breast/chest feeding. Breast feeding is considered solely feminine, again

locating trans men within a 'female' body (Karaian, 2013; Walks, 2017). A TGD person using their body for reproduction, is confusing and counterintuitive for the mainstream (Riggs, 2014; Toze, 2018). A 'real man' forfeits the right to participate in childbirth and lactation, regardless of if he has a uterus or mammary glands. TGD people can no longer occupy the 'woman's' domain of pregnancy and lactation when they transition (Bartholomaeus and Riggs, 2020; Walks, 2017).

### **TGD people as parents**

*'Transgenderism should preclude a person from procreating. I feel sorry for the poor kids'* (Chung a, Commentator 5).

Some comments were aimed specifically at the role of TGD people as parents. At times these comments were direct attacks on the parenting capabilities of TGD people. *'Those who do not identify with gender-binaries are not fit to be parents'* (Chung a, Commentator 5). According to this commentator, *'fit'* parents only exist within gendered parenting roles. This hostility towards non heteronormative families was also demonstrated through a 'suspicion' of TGD parents (von Doussa, et al., 2015). *'Our society can be ruined if these morons are allowed to propagate'* (Harris a, Commentator 4). These hostile comments speak to the gendered construction of parenting, and TGD people unable to be recognised as parents (Riggs, 2014; Toze, 2018).

Along with this was a perceived attack on the social value of the role of a parent. Some comments claimed that more inclusive language around childbirth and lactation will undermine the social value attributed to motherhood and the title, privilege and status afforded to mothers. *'There are many mothers who cherish their title and all that goes with*

*it'* (Jung, Commentator 1). Other comments invoked the honour and specialness of motherhood as something fundamental and sacred. *'I went through a lot of pain to earn the title "mother"'* (Harris a, Commentator 5). *'The word 'parent' or 'gestational parent' doesn't adequately capture the special bond that women have with their babies'* (Chung a, Commentator 6). These comments suggest that the inclusion of diverse people somehow takes something away from ciswomen as parents. *'What a joke, why are we robbing women of things that make them unique and special!!'* (Chung a, Commentator 7). This privileging of heteronormative families, parenting and parenting roles reflects how the titles of mother and father define the role and relationship with the creation of 'gendered personalities' (Averette, 2021). *'For most parents being called a mother or father is the most important thing in the world to them. Taking that away from them is offensive and just nasty'* (Harris a, Commentator 6). Without language for the role a TGD parent takes on, the sacredness of the TGD parents' role is missed. Rather this lack of recognised titles for TGD parents positions the TGD parent and their families as 'shocking, dangerous or simply unthinkable' (Toze, 2018, p.204).

It is worth mentioning that transfeminine people were being referred to as 'men' and the general understanding shown was that chestfeeding was a term designed to include transfeminine people not transmasculine people. This focus on transfeminine people excluded and erased transmasculine people's participation in childbirth and lactation. This reflects Riggs (2014) and von Doussa, et al's (2015) observations that a man who is a mother is unable to be recognised within the public imaginary.

## **Cisnormativity and the alleged erasure of cis women and men**

*'breast feeding is one female-only superpower that I don't want the Politically Correct to take away from us'* (Chung a, Commentator 8).

Several comments claimed that cis women faced erasure. This was often framed with words such as discrimination, offensive, disempowering, distressing, and belittling of ciswomen's status as female. *'What an extreme insult to natural women who are or who will be mothers'* (Chung a, Commentator 9). *'I am tired of it as a woman I feel that my birthright as a female heterosexual is somehow eroding before my eyes'* (Chung a, Commentator 10). This is a complex situation given the history and ongoing effects of the masculinist patriarchal environments that feminism has addressed and fought so hard to dismantle. The de-gendering of what have been considered women spaces can elicit a response based on this oppression and hard-fought visibility. What I noticed was that most of the comments claiming the erasure of ciswomen demonstrated transmisogyny and the exclusion of transfeminine people from women's spaces. *'As a woman, born female with all genetic bits and bobs that make me female and identify as female ... Women have already had enough stolen from us, do we now lose our gender identity as well because a man identifies as a woman?'* (Chung a, Commentator 11). What was misunderstood within this hate speech, was that the recommendations were mostly for the inclusion of transmasculine people undertaking pregnancy and lactation and non-heteronormative families in general. These commenters seem to miss that TGD people have also had to face the patriarchal system from an even more disempowered position than ciswomen.

These comments display ciswomen's sense of ownership and entitlement to childbirth, pregnancy, and lactation. *'I am incensed by the political correct woke class*

*disparaging, demeaning and delegitimizing my role as a wom[a]n in the human race'* (Chung a, Commentator 12). *'Maybe when a transgender male to female gives birth out of a uterus, I might take it seriously'* (Harris a, Commentator 7). These comments reflect what Averette (2021) describes as the essentialism of motherhood. This is the naturalising and creation of a gendered embodiment of motherhood. Some comments also claimed the erasure of cismen. *'So a mother is to be called "birthing parent" and a father "non birthing parent"?? Sounds like the feminist left want to erase the male population or at best make us into second class citizens!!!'* (Harris b, Commentator 2). This naturalising and embodiment of gender reveals there is an underlying assumption that changing the language of how parental roles are described, somehow destabilises, and devalues the roles of mothers and fathers.

### **Entitlement to majority status and power**

*'We don't have to accept this BS we are the majority'* (Roberts, Commentator 1).

Several comments clearly exercised and claimed entitlement to majority status and power. Some of these comments were violent and contained hate speech. This entitlement was demonstrated by the suggestion that TGD people are answerable to cisnormative people thus creating and reinforcing hierarchical social positioning. Some comments stated that majority culture is entitled to decide what is normal and what the social rules are to be. *'You know we don[']t need to pay any attention to these minority groups. Just ignore there [sic] bleating and carry on using the words you want. Don[']t feel ashamed just use the words you've used your whole life in normal society yes i said normal'* (Chung b, Commentator 5). The assumption that marginalised groups depend on the majority for

approval, created an atmosphere of gate keeping of the minority's membership into the public domain. *'Even if you identify as a man, as long as you lactate you have a breast. Cut them off and we'll start calling it a chest to keep you happy OK?'* (Chung b, Commentator 6). This comment displays an act of intimate violence against the TGD body by stating that a TGD person needs to *'Cut them ['breasts'] off'* for the majority to refer to this part of their body as a chest. This overfamiliarity with the body is used to degrade, threaten, and create an objectifying culture of ownership and entitlement over TGD bodies, identities, and lives. A TGD person's relationship with their body is deeply personal and individual. It is not up for public discussion to gate keep what TGD people should do with their bodies or language to be used for dominant cultures approval.

Other comments included hate speech and othering terminology. One commenter stated *'People who perverted the course of nature used to be called perverts'* (Jung, Commentator 2). *'Why is anyone listening to the trans activist freaks?'* (Jung, Commentator 3). Further to this were claims that the TGD community are bigots, selfish, self-centred, distorted, and unnatural. These comments are attempts to claim paternalistic authority, entitlement, and power over TGD people's social standing.

### **Ownership of public space**

Ownership of public space was asserted in many of the comments across all eight articles. One commenter wrote, *'this decree is just plain stupid if these people want to use these descriptions use them at home behind their bedroom doors. Get out of my life. I'm not in yours'* (Harris a, Commentator 7). This notion of 'behind closed doors' is a common adage often thrown at non heteronormative groups of people. Here asserting that TGD people,

experiences and lives should stay behind closed doors and keep out of the public eye. Another comment mentioned the '*underground*' as the place where TGD people belong. '*Treat it with the disdain it deserves and let them have their own little weird underground. That's how society used to work*' (Chung a, Commentator 13). This again is a familiar commentary that reflects non heteronormative groups that have been othered and experience exclusion from public space.

I also noted some commenters would claim to be allies whilst still maintaining ownership of public spaces. '*I am happy to be inclusive, but not when that inclusivity comes with exclusivity*' (Jung, Commentator 4). '*Happy to adopt a range of new terms, but these are just plain offensive and insulting so I suspect they won't take off*' (Baker, Commentator 1). These commenters are claiming they are inclusive, but the inclusion of TGD people within public spaces, institutions, and frameworks, appears too far for their tolerance to stretch.

### **The othering of Allies**

As supporters of TGD inclusion, the ANU academics involved in writing the recommendations, were also under attack by commenters. One commenter labelled academics as dangerous to '*our country*' (Harris b, Commentator 2). Another wrote that the reason they are academics is because '*They can't cope with the real world*' (Harris, a, Commentator 8). The ridicule, exclusion and undermining from commentators towards academics was evident. There was labelling of academics as crazy social engineers. Some claimed that academics have too much time on their hands and are wasting public money. '*That public moneys are being used to even discuss such recommendations is insidious*' (Harris a, Commentator 9). This talk of '*public moneys*' again separates TGD people needs

out from public interest. In referring to academics one commenter claims *'Their hatred of Australia, western civilisation, the nuclear family, Christianity and traditional social norms is limitless.'* (Harris a, Commentator 10). These comments above speak to a form of social dominance that extends beyond the minority group that is being Othered. It includes their supporters through virtue of going against the norm of the majority. This is often the case that allies are put into positions where attacks on them are held up as a warning to other majority group members to not defy the majority (Davis & Ernst, 2019; Ruiz, 2019).

### **Nationalism, Australian family values and the 'end of the world'**

*'OMG - what is happening to this once beautiful Country!!!'* (Harris a, Commentator 11).

The theme of nationalism, Australian values and 'the end of the world' narrative appeared in several comments. Many comments suggested that including TGD people within Australia's narrative would destroy its social fabric. Interestingly there were several comments suggesting that the handbook was a result of Chinese influence and international students. *'Just another display of [C]hinese infiltration at the Universities...'* (Chung a, Commentator 14). These comments held a racist undertone, whilst aligning the handbook as against the 'Australian way', Australian institutions, and *'ordinary Australians'* (Chung a, Commentator 15). Australian nationalism is tied up within heteronormative and masculinist narratives (Walsh & Karolis, 2008; Vickers, 2018). *'Australians deserve better than this !'* (Harris c, Commentator 1). Currently, for TGD people a place within a nationalist narrative is out of reach. Comments stated that the recommendations destroy the family. *'The hard left do not believe in the nuclear family. They wish to tear it down under the false & sinister pretence of diversity & inclusion'* (Chung b, Commentator 6). This reflects Averette's

argument that the motherhood is considered to support the 'smooth functioning of society' (2021, p.286). When normative versions of 'motherhood' appear impacted, the perception is that society will be destroyed.

The 'end of the world' narrative featured often. *'it's destroying the Human Race'* (Chung a, Commentator 15). The end of the world narrative also made links with the legalisation of same sex marriage. *'We were told during the SSM debate that there will be no change to families'* (Roberts, Commentator 2). Referring to marriage equality, this commenter suggests *'we open the door for woke activists to push for even crazier parts of the agenda'* (Roberts, Commentator 3). These comments evidence an instance of what feminist anthropologist Gayle Rubin (1993) describes as the 'domino theory' (p.25). This is when an 'activity acknowledged to be harmless' such as same sex marriage, should still be banned for fear it will "lead" to something ostensibly worse' (Rubin, 1993, p.25). In this case the inclusion of TGD people within public spaces is the ostensibly worse.

This chapter has highlighted some of the themes present within online comments made in response to articles about the ANU report. The comments imposed repronormativity through social dominance either directly or indirectly. Repronormativity and 'real' man discourse was used aligning the aetiology of TGD people with the gendered assumptions of nature and biology. This occurred with violent and objectifying measures of describing the processes of TGD people. Assumed sterility was imposed through a variety of ways with people mobilising online public commentary, to exclude TGD people from cisnormative spaces. Attempts to control public space occurred within the comments though hierarchical paternalistic entitlement to dominance. This was shown through the

assertion of ownership of public space and the suggested erasure of cispeople when TGD people are included. This also drew on the roles of the mother and father aligning it with nature to provide an argument that TGD people are not legitimate parents or belong within reproduction. The attitudes in the comments towards TGD people were that of hostility, exclusion, pathologising and othering where TGD people are deemed to be against Nationalist and family values, accused of creating a world apparently not worth being a part of. I unpack this imposition of repronormativity, ownership of public space and denial of the legitimacy of inclusion through language further in the next chapter where the use of gaslighting as a tool and tactic of dominance and control is highlighted and described.

## Chapter five: Ciscentric trans-erasing gaslighting

*'There [is] no such thing as "trans" people. It's all nonsense!'* (Chung a, Commentator 16).

In the previous chapter I analysed the content of the comments in relation to the presence of narrative and discourse. In this chapter I will discuss the methods of *ciscentric trans-erasing gaslighting* within the online comments made in response to the eight articles that form this case study. To do this, I will identify and analyse specific comments to expose the tactic of gaslighting that lay ferociously within. Some gaslighting was nuanced, and some was explicit textbook versions of gaslighting. Gaslighting will be discussed under the following themes: the gaslighting of language and self-representation, gaslighting through pathologisation and criminalisation, gaslighting through claiming authority over TGD people, gaslighting the perceived emotions of the target and gaslighting by the commenter claiming victim status. I will also describe the undermining and crazymaking gaslighting used, and the underlying threat towards TGD people including a reliance on institutions and structures that TGD people have which makes gaslighting possible.

Society has created a culture that allows TGD people to be legitimately gaslighted (Riggs & Bartholomeaus, 2018). Within the News Corp articles, the titles alone primed the gaslighting culture reflected in the comments. This is akin what Ruiz (2020) described as 'racial spectacles' where the narrative about or display of the marginalised group is being used in a way to create a culture of stereotyping and gaslighting. The 'gendered spectacles' used within the media articles was achieved through the wording of titles, wording within the article, and by liberally displaying images of ciswomen breastfeeding. This dominance positioned TGD people and their bodies as abject, objectified, othered and erased. These

spectacles created by News Corp, made TGD people available for an onslaught of the cisnormative hostility and abuse that followed.

Ciscentric trans-erasing gaslighting can occur as a response to the resistance to cisnormativity posed by the very existence of TGD peoples. In this case gaslighting responds to the contesting of repronormative assumptions and inclusion through gender neutral language. This is like what Davis and Ernst (2019), and Ruiz (2020) describe when referring to the racial and cultural gaslighting that occurs when people resist whiteness. The dominance of cisnormativity also reflects the structural and institutional settings of gaslighting (Pohlhaus, 2020). The use of the multiple voices of institutions, structures and recruiting other people by gaslighters makes this gaslighting so effective (Abramson, 2014; Davis & Ernst, 2019; Ruiz, 2020; Polhlaus, 2020). The combination of media representation and the many versions of gaslighting present within the commentary as well as the real-life experiences of exclusion, gaslighting and violence for TGD people reflects these multiple voices of gaslighting.

In this chapter, I will be referring to the online commenter as the gaslighter. This is a deliberate action to switch the power differentials. When a gaslighter is named and understood for what they are, and the trust placed in their testimony is downgraded and fact checked, the power of the gaslighting subsides (Davis & Ernst, 2019, Polhlaus, 2020; Stern, 2007 & 2018; Spear, 2019; Sweet, 2019).

### **Gaslighting language and self-representation**

*“Birthing parent” has nothing to do with inclusion. They are called mothers’* (Chung a, Commentator 17).

Many gaslighters mobilised an ownership of definitions of terms and claimed a right to determine how TGD people use their bodies. This was demonstrated through comments that stated or implied that TGD people should not want to have children or are not entitled to use their bodies to reproduce. Along with this was an assumption that TGD people are undermining cisnormative spaces when they use their bodies in ways cis people don't like. The prerogative of TGD people to describe their own anatomy and processes by using words such as chestfeeding was repeatedly challenged. *"chestfeeding" really? Even someone who has changed genders can't "chest feed". Get over it !* (Harris a, Commentator 11).

Comments such as this demonstrate a distinct refusal for TGD people to be able to self-represent. It shows an epistemic entitlement to gaslight the testimony of TGD people. It does this by attempting to create a flaw in TGD testimony by claiming authority to say that a person who changes gender cannot chestfeed (Stark, 2019). The words *'Get over it!'* is gaslighting TGD people as being oversensitive. *'Chestfeeding? Really? I'm not sure if I'm amused or bemused by this term. Why is there a need for an alternative to breastfeeding anyway? Breastfeeding is an accurate description of feeding a child, irrespective of what you identify as'* (Jenkins, 2021, Commentator 1). This gaslighter claims the right and entitlement to comment as the dominant positioned knower (Abramson, 2014; McKinnon, 2017; Pohlhaus, 2020). They express their bemusement at the introduction of language and experiences of the non-dominantly positioned knower. The use of *'amused'* and *'bemused'* are patronising terms that also signifies that this commenter is positioning themselves as the hearer, speaker, and knower (Catapang Padosky, 2020; Ruiz, 2020). They define the value of what is being discussed, affording them the power to doubt the reliability of TGD people. This means as the hearer they get to decide if something is amusing or bemusing.

Many gaslighters undermined the epistemic testimony of TGD self-representation, language and knowledge using a discourse of nature. *'[I]f this is true about the transgender man it is absolutely disgusting! Why would anyone think it is a good thing to defy nature'* (Chung a, Commentator 18). Whilst using the discourse of nature, this gaslighter also positions the TGD persons self-representation as abject through the words *'absolutely disgusting'*. This comment utilises the gaslighting tactic of making a proclamation (see Abramson, 2014) also dismissing another's authority to have a say. The notion of the *'facts'* of nature to gaslight TGD language and self-representation was also deployed. *'[S]tick to the facts in that our chromosomes determine our true sex and anything else is a belief or a feeling'* (Chung a, Commentator 19). Claiming that the reality of TGD people is a *'belief'* or *'feeling'* is ciscentric trans-erasing gaslighting.

The denial of the existence of TGD people is gaslighting (Riggs & Bartholomaeus, 2018; Quinn, 2020). Some gaslighters not only denied the existence of TGD people, but also gaslighted TGD supporters. In this case the ANU academics. *'It is wrong to encourage someone to believe something when it is not true, and when it goes against clear scientific evidence'* (Chung a, Commentator 20). This gaslighter is claiming epistemic authority by using dominant stereotypes around gendered science discourse to claim what experiences of self-representation and use of language are *'true'*. This is while espousing a moral judgement upon those that support TGD people as being *'wrong'*. It is occurring in this case to warn and police cisgendered people from going against dominant culture to support TGD people (Davis & Ernst, 2019; Ruiz, 2020).

*'Not transphobic here and all for gender neutrality but this is all just ridiculous'*, (Chung a, Commentator 21). This is a form of intentional second order gaslighting as

described by Catapang Podosky (2020). Here this gaslighter is stating that they agree with the concept of gender neutrality but disagree that TGD inclusion is an acceptable context for its use. They also state they are not transphobic which is implying to the reader that their version of gender neutrality is accurate. At the same time, they are claiming it as *'ridiculous'*. The use of words in this comment creates a culture of 'metalinguistic deprivation' as a wrong of second order gaslighting (Catapang Podosky, 2020). This is because the gaslighter is undermining TGD testimony and inclusion. This comment also makes them transphobic, whilst claiming the prerogative to define what is and what isn't transphobic. Further this gaslighting is making claim to epistemic authority whilst committing testimonial injustice, along with locating oneself as an 'ally' whilst undermining the group they are claiming to be an ally for (McKinnon, 2017).

### **Pathologisation and criminalisation**

*'This is disgusting and insane... this is criminal'* (Chung a, Commentator 22).

Linking TGD identities to pathology and disorders, or requiring criminal intervention, is an all too familiar narrative within the institutional and cultural regulation of TGD people. To pathologise and criminalise a person's existence and validity as a human being is a form of gaslighting (also noted by Riggs & Bartholomeus, 2018). It is aimed at undermining the reality of the humanness of TGD people and therefore rightful inclusion within public spaces and discourse. This creates an erasure and exiling of TGD people

Public comment within this case study reflects the historical and ongoing social positioning of TGD people as pathological or criminal. *'Two sexes in this world commonly know as Male and Female.....anything else is a mental issue. See your local head doctor*

*and get it fixed'* (Chung a, Commentator 23). Along with this gaslighters claimed that TGD people's lives and experiences have lost the plot, are delusional, lost touch with reality, are insane and *'either looking for attention or just plain crazy'* (Harris a, Commentator 11).

These historical tactics of ciscentric trans-erasing gaslighting liberally showed themselves within the comments from this case study. Phrases and words such as sick, lunatic minorities, insane, deluded and mentally deranged were regularly deployed.

Repronormativity and cisnormativity along with the prejudicial stereotypes (Catapang Padosky, 2020; Sweet, 2019) of mental illness were used by gaslighters.

Many comments stated that TGD people are best locked up residing away from 'normal' society. *For heavens sake, lock them up'* (Jung, Commentator 5). *'Enough. It's time to start throwing these clowns into lunatic asylums'* (Chung a, Commentator 24). *'Round these lunatics up, lock them up and throw away the key'* (Harris a, Commentator 12). These comments reflect the apparently common sentiment that asylums and jails are appropriate places for TGD people, and where we should reside for our lives. This is a form of gaslighting where a gaslighter uses the functions of the institution, here it is law, jail, and psychiatry, as a threat against the existence of TGD people (Davis & Ernst, 2019; Pohlhaus, 2020; Ruiz, 2020; Sweet, 2019).

Other gaslighters attempted to enforce institutional gaslighting by placing TGD people under the gaze of the law. *'This is a joke and the minister needs to make laws about it'* (Harris a, Commentator 13). *'I for one will always be a Father and that is what the law says I am. Send these geese to colonise Mars'* (Harris a, Commentator 14). This gaslighter is describing their gender identity and repronormative status as legal implying TGD identities are not, and apparently not even fit for earth.

## Gaslighting through claiming authority

*'What rubbish, so the alphabet people are triggered to hear the feminine word breast because they don't identify as a women but somehow the fact that they are pregnant does not trigger them?'* (Chung a, Commentator 25).

Many commenters claimed to be an authority on TGD lives and experiences. *'Please this is insane. If you asked same sex couples or transgender [people] I'm sure they'd see this as idiotic'* (Harris a, Commentator 15). They also claim authority whilst also undermining TGD people naming them *'the alphabet people'*<sup>5</sup> (as above comment by Commentator 25). Claiming to know the experience of a TGD person when one is not a TGD person is not only gaslighting (Abramson, 2014) and a testimonial injustice but also an act of dominance and entitlement to invade the autonomy, dignity, and privacy of TGD lives and experiences. This invasion has been normalised within the cisnormative workings of our society. This claiming of authority did not just happen in reference to trans masculine people but also with transfeminine people. *'Men who want to be mothers but can't, so they don't want females who can be mothers to be called mothers'* (Chung a, Commentator 26). Again, this comment like the first is claiming to know the thoughts and feelings of transfeminine people. It is also laced with an invasion of dignity, misgendering and contempt for the TGD community.

Commenters claimed authority by speaking intimately about TGD bodies, placing them under the cisnormative gaze. *'This political correctness has really gone too far. If you can feed a baby naturally, you have breasts. Therefore it IS Breastmilk. If a Child was conceived by your Sperm you ARE the father. If a child comes from your Womb, you ARE the*

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<sup>5</sup> 'Alphabet people' is a slur towards the LGBTIQ community

*mother'* (Chung b, Commentator 7). This takes claiming authority to a new level of invasion as it is violence enacted upon the intimacy of gendering the TGD body. *'I thought that a university should be a bastion of knowledge. But this? Look you can call it human milk if it comes for a man or a woman. Last time I checked babies milk comes for a "breast" not a chest. I mean heck, have they discovered that a mans chest can produce milk!!'* (Chung a, Commentator 27). This comment revolves around 'real man' discourse and is again claiming to be an authority on the workings of gendered bodies yet demonstrates a complete lack of knowledge about the existence, experience, and lives of TGD people and their bodies.

Some commenters claimed authority knowledge of the harms of the recommendations to children. One labelled the recommendations *'as a form of state-sponsored child abuse'* (Jenkins, Commenter 2). Another wrote *'we wonder why our children are suffering from mental health issues like never before, why kids are committing suicide at younger & younger ages... being taught all this garbage.. confusion reigns'* (Lord V, Harris a, Commentator 16). Comments such as this claim that including diverse groups of people within the public space is creating mental health issues for young people. *'I'm glad I've made the decision not to have children. I fear for anyone growing up in this country'* (Harris a, Commentator 17). These comments contain what Baird (2008) has termed as 'child fundamentalism'. This refers to the essential truth of the innocent child that is weaponised as a discursive resource to defend a worldview (Baird, 2008). In this case the worldview being defended is cisnormativity and repronormativity.

## Targeting emotions as a form of gaslighting

*'It's all over folks, we are letting delicate, irrational idiots dictate how society operates'*

(Chung a, Commentator 28).

Gaslighting the rationality of the target is a textbook gaslighting move (Abramson, 2014; Stark, 2019; Stern, 2019; Sweet, 2019). Within the online comments on the articles I read, this occurred frequently. This gaslighter lays claims to the rationality and power of the majority. *'1% minorities, are the ones that do all the crying and protesting, while the rest of the nation gets on with the job'* (Chung, b, Commentator 8). Here the majority is portrayed as silent, calm, and rational and doing the right thing by getting on with the job. Whereas minority groups are portrayed as irrational as they cry and protest which are delegitimated forms of action. Undermining the targets right to protest, is gaslighting (Abramson, 2014; Stark, 2019). This also reflects the feminising of the target by gaslighters through the 'irrational' feminine and the 'rational' masculine (Stark, 2019; Sweet, 2019).

I posit that there is a distinction between gaslighting the rationality of the target and gaslighting the legitimacy of the target's emotions. It is subtle. I see it as distinct from gaslighting a lack of rationality as it is the real or perceived emotionality that is being gaslit. The target's emotionality used as a tool of gaslighting has been briefly touched on within the literature (Abramson, 2014; Catapang Podosky, 2020; McKinnon, 2017; Stark, 2019; Wozolek, 2018). I would like to unpack further here. This occurs when the gaslighter puts a focus on the targets feelings rather than recognising the relevant human rights issue at hand. Focusing on the emotions of the target is gaslighting as it undermines a TGD person to have an untrustworthy testimony (McKinnon, 2017). This targeting of emotionality occurred in the comments by labelling the inclusion of TGD people as self-indulgent, attention

seeking or narcissism. This gaslighter demonstrated a tacit attack on emotionality through paternalism and the infantilising of TGD people. '[TGD people are like] *spoilt children dictating to their parents*' (Harris a, Commentator 18). '*We can't always have what we want. It's called life!*' (Harris a, Commentator 19). These comments are both common rhetoric doled out to children, teenagers, and young people to assert the dominance of adults. This can lead to 'testimonial quietening' and silencing where TGD people's testimony is discredited (Abramson, 2014; McKinnon, 2017).

Some gaslighter's positioned TGD people as so fragile that they can't handle the real world. Other gaslighters minimised the issue to be about TGD people's feelings being hurt. This occurred in a more sinister form of gaslighting in this comment. '*Coddled, enabled and never forced to deal with reality*' (Chung a, Commentator 29). The word '*forced*', infantilises, and comes with a violent undertone of threat. This gaslighter positions themselves as an authority on reality and insists TGD people should be '*forced*' to deal with dominant cisnormative structures and institutions. Pohlhaus (2020) argues this forcing of normativity, is a tactic of structural gaslighting.

Many gaslighters used the word '*offended*'. This is common neo liberal rhetoric dominate groups use to minimise non-dominant groups human rights and needs. Abramson (2014) would refer to this gaslighting tactic as a reconceptualisation of the harm. This is the gaslighting of the tacit emotionality of being '*offended*' that twists the reality. '*Pandering again to the easily offended minority. Help, want to get off this crazy world!*' (Harris a, Commentator 20). '*Why do people have to invent issues just to be noticed ? Its a sad world*' (Chung a, Commentator 30). The above two comments are attempts to take things a little further into the gaslit fugue. These gaslighters do this by endeavouring to twist the reality of TGD identities lives and experiences, into an invention and attention seeking behaviour to

be '*noticed*'. This is capped off by undermining of the reality of TGD peoples claiming that the existence of TGD people is the result of a '*sad*' and '*crazy*' world.

This gaslighter adds mockery to the mix. '*It is personal choice to be offended or not. Please keep me abreast of any new developments*' (Jung, Commentator 6). This occurred from some gaslighters with an entitlement to discuss TGD bodies in grotesque ways. They are undermining the seriousness of TGD exclusion by gaslighting inclusion as something not worthy of anything but mockery. This is the radical minimisation of the harm of cisnormativity, and undermining TGD people's rights to protest (Abramson, 2014; Stark, 2019).

### **Playing the victim**

*'This is the most distressing 'news' article I have ever read. Heartbreaking'* ('Salvatore', Harris a, Commentator 21).

Not only does the gaslighting commenter use the perceived or actual emotional reality of TGD people and allies to gaslight, but some use their own emotional response to gaslight and undermine the reality of TGD people as valid humans. *Ciscentric trans-erasing gaslighters* claimed that the TGD community's assertion of humanness and inclusion is so hurtful, disturbing, or damaging, that it resulted in evoking their emotions. These gaslighters position themselves as victimised by the existence and inclusion of TGD people. Stark (2019) has described this as men positioning themselves victims of women when women speak out against the harms they have suffered from men. Riggs and Bartholomaeus (2018) also touched on this when they noted that parents of TGD children may use their own

emotionality through the 'narrative of loss' to hinder their child from acting towards gender affirmation. It is as though the inclusion of TGD people is somehow oppressive and discriminating against cisgendered people. Emotionality is considered justified by the gaslighter as though the target's existence warrants anger, sadness, disgust, and offence from the gaslighter and an entitlement to suffering and victim status. It is these emotions that the gaslighter weaponises to systemically and interpersonally gaslight the target. There was an abundance of comments that demonstrated a victim narrative with several types of victim narratives that these people used to display and justify their victim status.

There was the angry victim. This type of gaslighter demonstrated outrage and offence by the inclusion of TGD people into public space. They considered their anger to be completely appropriate with an entitlement to have a say. *'This insulting rubbish MUST STOP!!! - I am a Father!!!! And a Husband!!!! What about my rights and Feelings!!!!'* (Harris a, Commentator 22). This gaslighter is demonstrating his angry victim status by suggesting the inclusion of TGD people disturbs his 'rights' as a 'Father!!!' and 'Husband!!!'. Some gaslighters equated the inclusion of TGD people as a punishment and others as abuse to justify their anger. *'Protect minorities but don't punish the rest of us in the process'* (Harris, a, Commentator 23).

The sad victim gaslighter claims that the inclusion of TGD people causes hurt and pain making them sad. *'This actually makes me want to cry'* (Harris a, Commentator 24). Sad victim gaslighters labelled TGD people and allies as bullies. Stating they feel hounded and majority views are not heard. Alongside the sad victim is the gaslighter who not only claims victim status but adds a twist to undermine their target. *'When my wife read about this garbage, she felt insulted as a biological women, mother, and wife. So in your world, it's ok*

*to insult other people who are not on the gender-alphabet spectrum, yes?’* (Chung b, Commentator 9). In this comment, it seems this gaslighter feels entitled to discredit and undermine TGD people by referring to us as the *‘gender-alphabet’* and claiming inclusiveness as *‘garbage’*, while also claiming victim status for his wife.

There was also the gaslighters who claimed TGD inclusion as an *‘appalling attack on human rights’* (Harris a, Commentator 25). This gaslighting behaviour claims the mere existence and inclusion of TGD people garners victim status is an attack on cispeople’s human rights. *‘I am a woman and I have breasts full stop. Do not take away my rights as a woman, I have rights too’* (Chung a, Commentator 31). These gaslighters claim their rights were being impacted as they felt denied of their entitlement to an opinion on the human rights, dignity, and validity of TGD peoples and their inclusion within public discourse and space. *‘The rights of normal and sane people don’t count at all these days’* (Chung b, Commentator 10). *‘This is highly offensive to me, I hope my opinion on the matter is valued enough as a human being to be noted!’* (Harris a, Commentator 25).

*‘Women are no longer allowed to be women and be proud that we are. Men are no longer allowed to be men and be proud of who they are. WHY should the majority of us be degraded for being who we are?’* (Chung a, Commentator 32). Here this gaslighter claims victim status by providing an account that the inclusion of TGD people within the place of pregnancy and lactation somehow has *‘degraded’* her for being proud to be a woman. The attachment to these identities as truth, means that when diverse identities become a part of the full picture of existence, they become gaslighted to deny, destabilise, and delegitimise their presence. Some victim-based comments made claims that including TGD people within public space, undermines their identity. *‘I’m a breastfeeding mother and to call me anything else diminishes my identity’* (Harris a, Commentator 26). One commenter equates identity

with humanness. ‘*Stop de-humanising us. I will always be Mum*’ (Harris a, Commentator, 27). These comments are interesting to unpack. Though contested within some contexts, it has been established within broader TGD literature and this thesis that TGD people are fundamentally considered non-humans through their unintelligibility within cisnormativity (Butler, 2006; Davies, Vipond, & King, 2019; Farley & Kennedy, 2016; Roen, 2019).

Interestingly, these gaslighters notice that their identity, intelligibility, and sense of humanity seem to be intertwined. These comments suggest being seen, represented, and valued in their identity is important for them. Claiming unintelligibility, that is implied in the discourse of cisnormativity, as reasoning for the dehumanising of TGD peoples means that TGD people are denied access to have their humanness validated through a recognised identity and inclusion in society.

There were many types of victims demonstrated within the comments. Each one utilised stereotypes and social power whilst resting on discourse that supports the testimony of the dominant culture. This is epistemic silencing by who is granted the power to speak (Abramson, 2014; Catapang Podosky, 2021; McKinnon, 2017). When gaslighting the TGD community, it is the identity and the essence of being a valid human subject that is itself gaslighted using *ciscentric trans-erasure gaslighting*. I argue that the victim mentality of the dominantly gendered culture comes from the deeply held value that diverse genders are not valid, meaning that the occupation of TGD people within public space constitutes a violation to cisnormativity. The public space located within this case study is possibly considered one of the most sacred gender exclusive spaces; pregnancy, childbirth, and lactation.

## Undermining and mockery

*'Complete and utter lunacy. Never has a single group had such a detrimental impact to the English language because of the perceived need for their lifestyle choices to be acknowledged'* (Chung a, Commentator 33).

Undermining and mockery are textbook gaslighting tactics aimed at distorting the reality and rationality of the target (Abramson, 2014; Stern, 2007,2018). The key to understanding the undermining tactic, like other forms of gaslighting, is the word choice of the gaslighter. The above comment used word such as *'utter lunacy'*, *'detrimental impact'*, *'perceived need'* and *'lifestyle choices'* to gaslight the existence of TGD people and the validity of inclusion within public space. Other word choices of gaslighters used in the comments included agenda, ideology, and madness, with reference to the majority being insignificant or ignored. *'All must be made to suffer to meet their demands. That is the twisted world they live in'* (Chung b, Commentator 11). This gaslighter uses subtle framing (see Abramson, 2014) like *'their demands'* and more prominent wording like *'twisted world'* to gaslight with the delegitimising and stigmatising discourse that surrounds TGD lives and reality. To refer to a group as twisted, brings about a discourse of perversion and immorality.

This comment reflects a more sinister version of undermining. *'They're not after equality, but dominance and preference'* (Chung a, Commentator 34). It suggests that TGD people are trying to dominate and want preferential treatment rather than equality. This has a hostile and threatening undertone. Linking the word *'dominance'* with inclusion paints a picture that TGD people are to be feared and fought back against. This is part of a white, masculinist, hierarchical culture that places those who are not white cisgendered

heterosexual males at risk. This comment also reflects the gaslighter being unable to tolerate a challenge to their own world view along with their need to be right (Abramson, 2014; Stern, 2007/2018).

Mockery was constantly deployed to undermine the inclusion and reality of TGD people. *'So when I go to my favourite butcher and ask for chicken breast fillets its now chicken chest fillets'* (Harris a, Commentator 28). Mocking comments included an invitation to others within dominant culture to laugh along and join in with ridicule, scorn, and contempt. *'Bahaha they cant even decide if th[ie]r a man, woman or a toaster!'* (Harris a, Commentator 29). This can create a powerful attack through echoing (see Paholhus; 2020), insisting on the public humiliation, patronisation, and shame of a marginalised community. The recommendations were often mocked as being an 'April fools' joke by many gaslighting commenters. *'A bit early for April Fools stories isn't it?'* (Harris a, Commentator 30).

### **Crazy making**

*'Why do those who wish to deny reality demand their insanity be supported by everyone?'* (Chung b, Commentator 11).

*'This is a 21[st] century construct created by people who have the luxury of not having to fight for survival like we humans used to'* (Chung b, Commentator 12).

What I am naming here as 'crazy making' are comments that are sinister and come with a hint of a threat. It is an umbrella term that encompasses distinct gaslighting tactics such as falsifying information, twisting the story, reframing the facts, mixed with undermining attacks, and creating an environment where the truth gets confused while the

gaslighter retains their perspective and reality. Again, the key to identifying the gaslighting nature in comments with crazy making, is to notice the word choices and framing. Subtle crazy making featured repeatedly within the comments. *'When did trying to normalize, something that[']s not normal become a thing?'* (Chung b, Commentator 13). These constitute the morally dark 'wrongs' of gaslighting to undermine or destroy a person's independent perspective (Abramson, 2014, p.12) Even short sentences can contain crazy making. TGD inclusion *'numbs the mind'* (Harris a, Commentator 31). The implied message in this crazy making comment is that the rational and reasonable mind could not make sense of the target's reality so it would become numb. The word numb also hints at a level of disengagement towards TGD people from the gaslighter. This means that the issue is implied to reside within the target's reality, rather than the structures surrounding the TGD person. *'Wow. How does a human mind even think this way?'* (Harris a, Commentator 32). This gaslighter is claiming that TGD people are the unthinkable persons to twist things in a crazy making way.

This gaslighter is attempting crazy making social dominance with reference to the social construct of what the definition of a family is. *'These outliers by their own lifestyles know they can't meet the definition of family, so they alter the concept so as to make a square peg fit in a round hole'* (Roberts, Commentator 4). This is a version of second order gaslighting. Here the concept of family including TGD people is not agreed upon by the gaslighter with the colloquialism phrase of square peg in a round hole. Using undermining their words such as *'outliers'*, *'know they'* and *'can't meet'* and describing the fundamental humanity of a TGD person as a *'lifestyle'*, twists the reality, is patronising, undermining and positions the TGD person as unreliable, without credibility and unable to give testimony under the threat of violence, exclusion and exile.

Another form of crazy making gaslighting are 'real world' and 'reality' narratives. *'I'm all for being inclusive but I WILL NOT pretend that reality can be overridden by feelings'* (Chung a, Commentator 35). Real world narrative describes the positioning of TGD people as an ideology, unintelligible and therefore not legitimate real people fit for the real world. Gaslighters would claim that TGD lives, and experiences are not part of the real world. *'I live in the Real World!!!'* (Chung b, Commentator 14). Gaslighters conflated real with normal. *'stand up for real people that want to live a normal life'* (Harris a, Commentator 33). This implies that those who sit outside the socially constructed bounds of normal consist of an ideology or fantasy and the more sinister non-human. Claiming to know the meaning of another person's reality is a textbook gaslighting move.

### **Dominance and the underlying threat of cisnormativity**

*'OMG This is becoming scary'* (Chung a, Commentator 36).

As we discovered in chapter one, the power of gaslighting occurs within two distinct conditions. These are when there is an underlying threat towards the target, or if the target has a reliance on the gaslighter in some way (Graves & Samp, 2021; Stern, 2007,2018). The underlying threat for TGD people is the imposition of cisnormativity and repronormativity. This is achieved structurally and institutionally as well as through the psychiatric gaze, medical gaze, legal gaze, and other manifestations of the cisnormative gaze. These all position the majority as the authority with coercive power. This has real life consequences for TGD people coming in the form of institutional and structural exclusion and erasure, hate crimes, lack of interpersonal safety both publicly and privately, and all forms of

violence. All of which can lead to poor mental health and wellbeing outcomes and suicidality.

Gaslighting in the online comments were laced with threat and hostility. *'I find it scary that 2% actually go along with this garbage! The crazies are actually making progress towards their agenda'* (Jung, Commentator 6). This gaslighter used a form of crazy making gaslighting by referring to TGD people as *'crazies'* with an *'agenda'* that align with stereotypes and common cisnormative rhetoric. It is the sinister tone of the comment through the words *'crazies ... making progress'* and the words *'scary'* that brings the underlying sense of threat. The word scary, twists the narrative, and implies that TGD people are a threat and their inclusion and presence within public spaces is something to fear. The fear of TGD people has historical and present real life ongoing implications for TGD people through pathologising and dehumanisation and is used as justification to *'defend'* oneself by inflicting violence on this perceived threat.

This gaslighter capitalised on the silent majority cliché often used by conservative dominant groups. *'It's time for the silent majority to be less silent!!'* (Harris a, Commentator 34). This comment is implying that it is time for the majority to fight back. These comments reflect the threat that Richardson-Self (2020) described as an *'aesthetic'* of hostility undermining the dignity and safety of TGD people. There was also a creation of an *'us and them'* narrative, inviting comradeship and recruitment of other majority subjects through mockery. *'I think this story is trying to make us laugh whilst we are in lockdown ..... trying to brighten our moods. Well it worked !'* (Harris a, Commentator 35). This recruitment and comradeship is achieved through using words like *'us'* *'we'* and *'our'*. *'why change our language to suit the minority alphabet community'* (Chung a, Commentator 36). There were several comments calling for people to be publicly named and shamed.

Some gaslighters demonstrated a more explicit threat to TGD people with attempts to normalise the violent exclusion of TGD people from the world. This reflects Abramson's (2014) argument that gaslighters are focused on the destruction of their target. '*Perhaps we could encourage them all to go to some far off island to have somewhere they can call their own and make their own perfect society. Then we bomb the \*\*\*\* out of it*' (Chunga, Commentator 37). Using the words '*bomb the \*\*\*\* out of it*' is an explicit threat. '*Why do we give these people air to breath.....*' (Chunga, Commentator 38). Here suggesting that TGD people's lives are not worth living and inviting camaraderie of the majority with the word 'we'.

When TGD people start occupying public spaces, particularly gendered spaces, violence toward them increases (Colliver & Silvestri, 2020). Gaslighting ensues as an attempt to silence, degrade and exclude TGD people whilst taking ownership of public spaces so TGD people will return to the fringes and underground. By holding cisnormativity as the authority on what is a valid human experience, these gaslighters are attempting to dictate how people can occupy the world. This is an allegiance to the paternalism and hierarchical forces to dominate and decide what is acceptable for TGD people. This reflects the power differential that becomes operational through the comments highlighting the underlying threat of cisnormativity which is occurring within the sociocultural structures and institutions.

The online comments, which I have discussed showed a distinct ongoing lack of curiosity, critical engagement, or acceptance of trans and gender diverse people. Instead, what is demonstrated within this chapter, was cisnormative dominance through *ciscentric*

*trans-erasing gaslighting*. This was displayed through many ways including labelling the existence of TGD as a belief or feeling and undermining TGD people's right to protest cisnormativity. Gaslighters used tactics of mockery, claiming authority, making proclamations, targeting emotions, asserting victim status, and using historical and existing stereotypes to frame TGD people. The underlying forces that bring this gaslighting into effect is the real or perceived threat to TGD people's safety, the imposition of cisnormativity and erasure along with TGD people's reliance on institutional and structural resources for healthcare, wellbeing, and social participation.

The use of this gaslighting reflected the cisnormative understandings of gender that simply do not allow for gender diverse bodies, lives, and experiences. It is the intelligibility of these lives itself that is gaslighted. TGD people were seen as being non-human, immoral and abject. The very fact that a TGD person would even enter the cisgendered sacred space of reproduction and parenting set aside for 'normal' humans defies the boundary of where non-humans dare to tread. This crossing of cisnormative boundaries fuels the need for dominance and power that the gaslighter has (Abramson, 2014; Graves & Samp, 2021; Stern, 2007,2018). The gaslighting demonstrated in this chapter undermines the TGD persons legitimate right to use their body and participate in life and public space in whatever ways they desire.

## Chapter six: Conclusions

Gaslighting is a sinister form of abuse and attack that threatens to destabilise a person's sense of self through their reality and perspectives being undermined and reoriented towards the gaslighter. As we can see from this case study, gaslighting as a tool of dominance was widely used and carried out by people against TGD people within online comments. As mentioned in the introduction, online public comment reflects the offline values of the group that commenter belongs to. What this means is a very real risk that TGD people are living within a broader *ciscentric trans-erasing gaslighting* culture. The reality of cisnormative dominance renders a TGD person as invisible, erased and exiled. The people who chose to use gaslighting demonstrated no accountability with some positioning their own cisnormativity as the victim of TGD inclusion. This commentary and my analysis show the ongoing and systemic ways that gaslighting is used to constantly remind of and police the exclusion of TGD people

Through my research and what I have analysed in the online comment, the themes of 'real' man discourse, repronormativity, nature, the perceived erasure of cisgendered people, makes the following clear. There is a repetition and reinforcement over many iterations of the constant broader message to TGD people of the idea that we don't belong. Who we fundamentally are and how we experience the world and occupy space is not welcome. We see this in the comments above suggesting that we are an ideology, false, sinister, unnatural, pathological, and abject. Further that we undermine Australian values and should colonise Mars or be blown up. It was also proclaimed that we shouldn't have kids or be parents. That we destroy family values, take away the rights of cisgendered people to remain unquestioned, and we should be locked up and hidden away because of it.

The impetus for this thesis for me was to recognise and outline not only this constant message of exclusion and denial of my existence that I have experienced throughout my life as a gender diverse person, but also to demonstrate the hostility that is expressed behind that message. This hostility is exemplified in my thesis by gaslighting. Richardson-Self's (2020) research as mentioned, noted very similar themes and comments in her analysis. What I have described here in chapters four and five is not an isolated incident. When TGD people or supportive TGD policy enter public domains and discourse, this hatred and abuse follows. Arguably for most TGD people, even being born brings on this onslaught. This is deeply harmful.

There is wisdom within emotional distress and suicidality. A person who is considering suicide is a holder of knowledge and wisdom of the suffering and issues society experiences as a community (Ball, 2020). That TGD people as a group in our society are experiencing significant distress and suicidality means there is an underlying wisdom, knowledge, and ability of TGD people to read the constant script that we are being fed. The creation of a dissociated fragmented, subtle, and frightening *gaslit fugue* over TGD people is evidence of this. There is an urgent need for this to change. TGD people are currently unsafe in most contexts and the distress is evident. It is no coincidence that TGD people have such high levels of suicidality and psychological distress (LGBTIQ+ Health Australia), given the level of tacit and overt gaslighting we experience. I argue that this cultural, structural, institutional, and interpersonal *ciscentric trans-erasing gaslighting* which is normalised, causes trauma for TGD people and even developmental trauma for TGD kids. This is the harms of gaslighting a fundamental aspect of what society constructs as what makes us human, our gender.

This thesis demonstrates that *ciscentric trans-erasing gaslighting* is a real and ongoing disturbing weapon of cisdominance. The identification of this type of gaslighting, naming it for what it is helps to disempower it. As more of society's structures and institutions adopt frameworks and processes, such as the ANU's Gender-Inclusion Handbook, the social and institutional inclusion of trans and gender diverse people will become normalised.

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